Toward an affinity space methodology: Considerations for literacy research

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ABSTRACT: As researchers seek to make sense of young people's online literacy practices and participation, questions of methodology are important to consider. In our work to understand the culture of physical, virtual and blended spheres that adolescents inhabit, we find it necessary to expand Gee's (2004) notion of affinity spaces. In this article, we draw on our research examining adolescent literacies related to The Sims video games, The Hunger Games novels, and the Neopets online game to explicate nine features of affinity space research that reflect participation in, and research about, online environments. We argue that studying adolescent literacies in affinity spaces affords us access to participants outside our geographic proximity, readily available web-based historical record of the affinity spaces' practices, and a way to trace literacy practices across portals, modes and texts. However, affinity space research poses challenges, including issues of recruiting and maintaining relationships with participants, the instability and impermanence of online environments and artefacts, and the porous boundaries of field sites. This article concludes with recommendations for future literacy research conducted in online spaces and implications for literacy teaching and learning. Our aim is to begin articulating a new methodological framework for studying affinity spaces: affinity space ethnography.

KEYWORDS: Adolescence, affinity spaces, literacy, methodology, multimodality, new literacies, new media, online participation, research design, technology.

STUDYING ADOLESCENT LITERACIES IN AFFINITY SPACES

Young adults are spending increasing amounts of time interacting online. According to a recent survey by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2011), 94% of adolescents in member countries have at least one computer at home. Furthermore, using a computer at home had a greater impact on their digital literacy development than using a computer at school (OECD, 2011). Research by the Pew Internet and American Life Project shows that 73% of adolescents in the United States use online social networks (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith & Zickuhr, 2010) and 64% participate in content-creating activities (Lenhart, Madden, Smith & Macgill, 2007). To participate in these Internet-based activities, adolescents engage in new social practices that involve reading, writing, and other modes of communication. These reports suggest that young people's

meaningful engagement with technology in out-of-school spaces supports the acquisition of critical 21st century literacy skills, including creativity and collaboration.

As digital literacy practices become a core part of adolescents' everyday lives, literacy researchers call for increased study of these practices. Leu (2009) points to the importance of capturing the continuous change happening as the Internet impacts our literacy practices. Moje (2009) argues for research that further develops our conceptualisations of new media and new literacies. Alvermann (2008) encourages researchers to move beyond merely discussing Internet-related practices to theorising the implications they may have for classroom teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. As literacy researchers seek to answer these calls, questions of methodology are important to consider. We believe that an expanded notion of Gee's (2004) affinity space concept offers insights into how literacy researchers can make sense of the multi-sited and networked spaces adolescents increasingly inhabit.

What is an affinity space? According to Gee (2004), affinity spaces are sites of informal learning where "newbies and masters and everyone else" interact around a "common endeavour" (p. 85). These physical, virtual or blended spaces are often spread across many sites, such as face-to-face meetings, message boards, blogs and web pages. We use Gee's term *portals* to conceptualise the numerous, connected spaces or entry points that our research participants visited. These portals offer multiple interest-driven trajectories, opportunities to learn with others, and paths toward becoming an authentic participant (Squire, 2011). In our own research, we studied sites where the common endeavour was creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction, *The Hunger Games* fandom, and the *Neopets* online game. We found Gee's affinity space concept to be a useful starting point for understanding the organisation of our online research sites, though one that must be expanded as adolescent literacy practices and affinity spaces themselves evolve. In this article, we explicate nine features of an expanded notion of affinity spaces and present experiences of conducting research in such dynamic spaces in order to work towards an affinity space methodology.

In the remainder of this article, we first provide brief introductions to our studies related to *The Sims* video games, *The Hunger Games* novels, and the *Neopets* online game. Next, we offer an updated conceptualisation of affinity spaces and explore methodological considerations for contemporary literacy research. To highlight the affordances and constraints of this methodological tool, we provide illustrative examples from the affinity spaces we studied. In doing so, we consider how the affinity space concept shapes our research design, our relationships with participants, and our understanding of literacy practices across portals, modes and texts. Finally, we offer recommendations for literacy educators and researchers and discuss how this article serves as our first step in working toward a new methodological framework for studying affinity spaces, which we refer to as *affinity space ethnography*.

RESEARCH CONTEXTS

In the following introductions to the affinity spaces surrounding *The Sims*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Neopets*, we provide details about the media, the fan practices, the make-up of the affinity spaces and our three research studies.

The Sims

The Sims series of video games is the most popular PC game of all time, with more than 150 million copies sold worldwide (Electronic Arts, 2012). A life simulation game, *The Sims* invites players to create families, design homes, build communities, and interact in an open-ended game space appealing to a diverse population of gamers. One key to the franchise's success is that it encourages players to make the experience their own by allowing custom content, such as clothing, hairstyles and home furnishings, to be created and downloaded into an individual's game. Called a "dollhouse" by some who criticise the game's emphasis on homemaking (Martey & Stromer-Galley, 2007; Schiesel, 2006), *The Sims* has been credited for engaging more females in video game play (Gee & Hayes, 2009). In addition to playing the game and designing content, some fans also create machinima (animated films made within video games) and write *Sims* fan fiction using the games (Lammers, 2011).

The affinity space surrounding *The Sims* includes a widespread network of online fan sites, where gamers upload and download content, discuss their game play, issue challenges, share cheat codes, publish stories, and much more. Within this network, players have access to millions of custom content objects, thousands of *Sims* fan-fiction texts, and millions of fans from across the globe. In a study of *The Sims* affinity space, Lammers (2011; 2012) examined a particular portal for *Sims* fan fiction writers, *The Sims Writers' Hangout* (*SWH*). This research focused on the literacies and learning adolescents engage in as participants within *SWH*.

The Hunger Games

The Hunger Games is part of a growing number of dystopian novels written for young adults (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2011). Author Suzanne Collins' trilogy includes *The Hunger Games*, *Catching Fire* and *Mockingjay*. Since 2008, they have sold tens of millions of copies worldwide, and their popularity continues to rise with the release of the first motion picture adaptation in March 2012. Set in a post-apocalyptic world, *The Hunger Games* describes the glittering capitol of Panem and the surrounding thirteen impoverished districts. In the Dark Days, the districts rose up against the capitol. As their punishment, each district must send two tributes to fight in the Hunger Games; the winner is the only one left alive at the end. Collins describes the protagonist, 16-year-old Katniss Everdeen, as a futuristic Theseus. The trilogy follows Katniss from her life in District 12 to her participation in the Hunger Games to her life as a revolutionary.

In response to Katniss' compelling story, fans are writing *Hunger Games*-inspired fiction, creating art, producing videos, composing music,and designing role-playing games. Not only are young fans using the trilogy as the basis for their creative endeavours, they are critically engaging with the text-based story in affinity spaces. *Hunger Games Top Sites* tracks over 60-plus fansites that have a combined total of over 20 million page views. These sites are based in the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Turkey, Germany, Spain, Brazil, Russia, Mexico, Italy, and Portugal. Curwood's (2012) research has found that some portals within the *Hunger Games* affinity space focus on characters or themes, while others offer a venue to share fan-created work, play role-playing games, or access teaching resources.

Neopets

Somewhat similar to *Pokemon* or *Tamagotchi, Neopets* is a web-based virtual pet site where players own and care for virtual pets. A massively multiplayer site that is built through static web pages, message boards, and flash plug-ins, *Neopets* boasts over 250 million created pets. There is no central *Neopets* narrative path or system of quests. Instead, the site presents a series of achievements, trophies and interactive "plots" that shape users' play, can be displayed in user and pet profiles, and confer different kinds of prestige. In response to this openness, users focus on and specialise in areas that interest them. Studies of *Neopets* practices indicate that common site activities include collecting virtual items; designing and coding on-site content and graphics; training pets to fight in a player vs. player arena; playing flash games; and producing writing and art about pets, their owners, and the world of Neopia (Lu, 2010; Magnifico, 2010b; 2012). The site has also been criticised for its focus on "immersive advertising" and "advergaming" (Grimes & Shade, 2005; Wollslager, 2009).

Magnifico's work (2010b; 2012) posits that *Neopets'* lack of a persistent virtual world leads to a fusion of the *Neopets* game and the affinity space surrounding it. As part of their on-site gameplay, players engage in meta-game practices – ones that are more typically found in affinity space portals. They discuss their play in guilds and on message boards, construct identity profiles, gather information on gameplay, write guides and stories about various aspects of gameplay, construct challenges in their specialty areas (for instance, hosting art and writing contests, player vs. player tournaments, or coding challenges), and role-play themselves and their pets.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Internet grants a potentially wide and interactive audience to many more young people than ever before. Online spaces have produced a much greater number o – or at least far greater visibility for – writers, artists, designers, and leaders. Adolescents' increasing levels of Internet access in and out of school directly impacts their ability to participate in affinity spaces. While some may gravitate to affinity spaces that focus on sports or politics, others might turn to spaces dedicated to books, films or video games. Youth draw on a variety of texts, discourses, modes and semiotic resources as they engage with their common passion in online affinity spaces. In our research, we followed young adult participants and examined their engagement with affinity spaces related to *The Sims, The Hunger Games* and *Neopets,* as well as the emergent culture of these spaces and the digital literacies that they support.

Reconceptualising affinity spaces as a methodological tool

As we argue for affinity spaces to serve as useful sites for literacy researchers, we build on Gee's (2004) original articulation of affinity spaces, acknowledging how these spaces have changed over time. The introduction of numerous online technologies and social networking sites has created affinity spaces that are constantly evolving, dynamic, and networked in new ways. While it was initially common for an affinity space to be defined by one central portal (for instance, a discussion board), contemporary affinity spaces often involve social media such as Facebook and Twitter, creative sites like DeviantArt and FanFiction.net, and blogging platforms such as Tumblr and Wordpress. Often working across multiple modes and

mediums, online affinity spaces are able to build and maintain a substantial community audience that helps to support young adults' motivation and creative production (Magnifico, 2010a).

As we begin to theorise how participation in affinity spaces impacts adolescent literacies, we recognise the relevance of theoretical work in the areas of human cognition, practices and literacies. Theorists who posit that the nature of the tools changes the nature of the work (Hutchins, 1995; Norman, 1993; Wertsch, 1991) might argue that it would be impossible for these changes in perspective, framework, and audience to avoid pervading the consciousness of young people today. At the same time, situated cognition and Discourse theorists (Gee, 2008; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) might argue that the ways in which technology seeps into literacy practices would depend heavily on the specific communities and the ways in which the new tools are or are not taken up. Drawing from the work of each of these areas, we argue that affinity spaces function in ways that knowledge is effectively distributed across learners, objects, tools, symbols, technologies and the environment (Gomez, Schieble, Curwood & Hassett, 2010).

Affinity spaces, in many ways, serve as rich repositories of adolescent literacy practices that stretch across time, space, communities, modes and tools. With this in mind, we argue that conducting affinity space research requires attention to the following features:

> *A common endeavour is primary.* The notion that affinity spaces develop primarily in pursuit of a "common endeavour" (Gee, 2004) is still salient. This is an important consideration for an affinity space researcher to consider because it requires attention to the ways that geographic boundaries are superseded. Because the common endeavour, and not other social factors, brings participants together in affinity spaces, adults and youth often engage in these spaces together in collaborative relationships. Therefore, making sense of cross-generational participation may be relevant to understanding the practices within an affinity space.

> *Participation is self-directed, multifaceted and dynamic.* Gee (2004) discussed the "different forms and routes of participation" and that there are "different routes to status" within affinity spaces. Particularly with the recent explosion of technologies for creating websites and web communities (for example, Tumblr, Ning, Google Plus), it is important to note that participation is not limited to the existing portals within an affinity space. Anyone can build their own portal to generate content within an affinity space. Such self-directed participation requires an affinity space researcher to look for new portals and examine participants' motivation for engaging in various literacies within and across portals.

> *In online affinity space portals, participation is often multimodal.* Whereas text-based discussion boards served as key portals for media-related affinity spaces when Gee first developed the concept, many current online portals now encourage, or even require, multimodal participation. Participants in these spaces produce creative and multimodal content to demonstrate their media fandom, creating websites, avatars, blogs, videos, maps, podcasts and machinima. As new technologies become readily available and make capturing, editing and uploading media significantly easier, the

expectation for multimodal contributions in affinity spaces and in schools increases (Curwood & Gibbons, 2009). For an affinity space researcher, attending to the multimodal nature of the literacy practices within the space impacts data collection and analysis.

Affinity spaces provide a passionate, public audience for content. Within affinity spaces, participants develop expertise or intensive knowledge (Gee, 2004). Content creators gain social status and demonstrate their expertise by sharing their creations within the space. In this way, the affinity space's participants become the audience for content and can respond to these works as active readers, or even collaborators. Affinity space researchers should consider how this audience impacts young people's literacy practices and design choices.

Socialising plays an important role in affinity space participation. While the common endeavour may be the primary motivation for engaging in an affinity space, not all participation is solely focused on this endeavour. Other practices may include playing games, answering trivia questions, or participating in activities designed to build community within the space. These low-risk activities allow newbies to engage in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) as they get to know the community. In addition, the socialising activities of these portals are a central part of getting people into the space on a regular basis. In order to get a complete picture of the literacies within the portal, researchers should attend to the socialising and other practices that may initially seem unrelated to the primary mission of an affinity space.

Leadership roles vary within and among portals. Whereas Gee (2004) noted that affinity space and portal leaders are not "bosses" who order people around, we have found that portals often have leaders who act as gatekeepers or moderators. Sometimes they even have official business-like titles, such as administrator or marketing coordinator. In addition, leaders can be designers, facilitators, organisers, delegators, and fill any number of other roles within a portal. These roles are not only available to adults, even in cross-generational spaces. Therefore, it is important for affinity space researchers to acknowledge the differences in available leadership roles and to acknowledge that members sometimes invent new roles when the need arises.

Knowledge is distributed across the entire affinity space. In affinity spaces, knowledge and content are often distributed across numerous fans, portals, texts and other media. No one person or portal needs to be all-encompassing within the space. Rather, many portals have come to specialise in a particular aspect of knowledge or content, and the diversity of portals becomes a strength of the space as participants travel between them. Paying attention to how knowledge is distributed encourages researchers to attend to the variety among portals and how they contribute to the wider affinity space.

Many portals place a high value on cataloguing and documenting content and practices. Because affinity spaces are made up of a multi-generational, multicultural, and multilingual group of participants, leaders often catalogue content and detail expectations for how participants can successfully contribute within a portal. Such

explanations guiding participation are often multimodal or multimedia presentations, not just print-based texts. The organisation of the space becomes paramount as a way to maintain order among diverse groups of participants. The affinity space researcher needs to attend to how knowledge is explicitly distributed and organised within the space.

Affinity spaces encompass a variety of media-specific and social networking portals. In addition to the media-specific and fan-created sites that serve as portals to an affinity space, many also connect to existing, separate social networking sites, such as Facebook, YouTube, Flickr, Tumblr and Twitter. Because affinity spaces often include social networking sites, an affinity space researcher may be able to maintain contact with informants this way. Often, the interconnected relationship among media-specific, fan-created and social networking portals is such that they need each other as each contributes to the growth and dynamic participation of the spaces. These social networking spaces have their own features of literate participation, such as Twitter hashtags, and researchers must attend to the ways in which such literacies are taken up or modified within the affinity space.

AFFINITY SPACE RESEARCH IN PRACTICE

Drawing on our research on *The Sims*, *The Hunger Games* and *Neopets*, we now turn to explore the affordances and constraints of using an affinity space lens. As literacy researchers, we believe that affinity spaces offer us insight into the complex, networked nature of adolescent literacy in a digital world. Affinity space research presents unique challenges in terms of how we recruit and maintain relationships with participants, collect data and define research boundaries. At the same time, this approach to online research allows us to ask critical questions about the culture of these online spaces and trace literacy across mode, text, time and space. In order to work toward a more formal methodology for affinity space ethnography, we begin by exploring the affordances of affinity space research as a means of studying adolescents' literacy practices.

Affordances

Tracing literacy practices within and across portals
By their very nature, affinity spaces are dynamic. In our research, we found that when adolescents use multiple portals to enter the wider fan-based affinity space, they encounter diverse opportunities for participation, and their semiotic construction of the affinity space evolves over time. Traditionally, the question posed to ethnographers is, "*Where* are you going to do your fieldwork?" (Geertz, 1995). The answer, traditionally, would be a physical location. To date, most online ethnographers have focused on one specific virtual location, such as a website or a discussion forum. Literacy scholars, such as Black (2009), have conducted single-sited research of adolescents' online literacy practices. While her work yielded important findings related to young adults' fan fiction writing on the portal FanFiction.net, it was beyond the scope of her study to investigate how participants engaged with the multi-sited affinity space related to the manga and anime series *Card Captor Sakura*.

Affinity space research can either examine one portal or multiple portals. While the former focuses on the culture of one specific portal, the latter turns toward the wider culture, practices and discourses of the affinity space. Magnifico's (2010b; 2012) research on *Neopets*, for example, focused on several conversational spaces within a specific website, which allowed her to gain insight on the culture of this portal and adolescents' writing practices. Lammers' (2011; 2012) and Curwood's research, however, sought to build ethnographic studies around key informants rather than on specific portals to the affinity space. This decision impacted the research questions, the methods and the findings, and required them to trace literacy practices both within and across portals in *The Sims* and *The Hunger Games* affinity spaces. Following informants as they move among portals highlights the ways social media such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube,and Tumblr can be integral to young people's engagement in affinity spaces.

In order to gain insight into adolescent literacy practices related to *The Hunger Games*, Curwood traced young people's participation across multiple portals over several years. By actively recruiting international informants who held leadership roles in portals as moderators and designers, she was able to see how their social capital translated into highly visible roles within the affinity space. For instance, one young woman was asked to fact-check a book related to *The Hunger Games*. This approach to literacy research is demanding, because researchers must continually investigate, access and participate in multiple portals within the affinity space. However, focusing on informants' experiences in various portals helps to direct the data collection and data analysis.

Finally, we have found that portals to affinity spaces constantly emerge, close or evolve. At the onset of *The Hunger Games* study, Curwood intended to research fansites such as Mockingjay.net. Within the first six months, however, several new and powerful portals emerged, including new alternative reality games. One of her key informants decided to create the official support site for one of the games. In that capacity, he contributed to the game design, created video tutorials, recruited staff, and designed, programmed and marketed a website in the span of a few short months. Curwood traced his participation in this new portal. Affinity space research, in that respect, is open and responsive to the ever-changing nature of portals as well as adolescents' emerging roles within the affinity space.

Access to participants outside of our geographic proximity
From the perspective of fans, one of the major affordances of online affinity spaces lies in connecting to a global network of fans for planning, writing, socialising and art-making. While fans may not live in the same physical location, affinity space portals such as message boards, wikis and social networks enable participants to discuss their interests and collaborate on projects, even if they have little chance of ever meeting in real life. As Lunsford and Ede (2009) put it, new media and digital literacies have opened up a space where creators may stand "among the audience", working with and receiving feedback from others who might share interests, skills and ideas for future creative work. And, as Gee (2004) points out, participation in these spaces is often governed by interest, knowledge,and communication – rather than by nationality, age or school grade level.

From our perspective as affinity space researchers, the same benefits apply. While at first it might seem difficult to document the practices and cultures as adolescents engage with global

literature, media and game franchises, we can learn about and participate with them when these groups move online. Examining the online portals within affinity spaces enables us to learn about the coordination of fan activities in multiple countries, as well as the documentation and sharing thereof.

Our own studies include participants in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Australia. Particularly with the advent of free instant messaging and video-conferencing software, we have found it entirely possible to learn from and develop relationships with participants in online affinity spaces that span the globe. In that sense, affinity space research expands the boundaries of the research site in new and compelling ways.

Available record of affinity space practices
In an affinity space, where knowledge is both distributed and dispersed (Gee, 2004), a key component of participation involves posting content. This content takes a variety of forms, including discussion in an online forum, tweets or status updates in social media networks, and creations posted in other portals. For affinity space researchers, such displays and sharing of knowledge create a record of the space's practices. We agree with Androutsopoulos (2008) that research based solely on examining online data is insufficient to understand the nature of literacies within an affinity space. However, online records give the affinity space researcher access to data that inform interactions with study participants.

When researching *The Sims Writers' Hangout*, Lammers (2011) had access to all 600,000 posts dating back to the site's inception in 2005. The search function within the discussion board helped navigate the enormous data set; site features also included reports that provided information about individual members, including number of posts, location, age and gender. As a result, there was five-year record of the portal's practices available for research.

While such a record can be seen as an affordance of conducting affinity space research, barriers to entry still do exist, and obtaining ethical consent to do research in these spaces requires careful thought because of the nature of online data and the potentially long-term presence of postings made on message boards and websites. Each of us has encountered challenges similar to those described by several online methodologists (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Markham & Baym, 2009) regarding the logging of public postings, art and stories. While we analyse these artefacts as data, the original files could threaten the anonymity of our participants as long as they remain online.

Constraints

In the previous section, we explore some of the benefits of using affinity space research to investigate adolescents' online literacy practices. Here, we consider some of the difficulties that have arisen in our work. While some of these are common to all research endeavours, our focus on affinity spaces presents some unique challenges.

Working to develop and maintain relationships with key informants
First, our work depends upon key adolescent informants. The use of the term "informant" is rooted in ethnography, although scholars such as Agar (1980) and Wolcott (1999) lament the ugliness of the term because of the association to squealing or betraying secrets. Our

informants are critical to giving us, as researchers, access to and insight into the culture of fan-based affinity spaces. However, recruiting and maintaining relationships with key informants can be challenging.

Conducting ethnographic studies of affinity spaces involves maintaining contact with informants over time. Our research projects on affinity spaces related to *The Sims*, *The Hunger Games* and *Neopets* each lasted over a year. We found that some informants preferred to Skype regularly or quickly respond to email inquiries. Others preferred to stay in touch through instant messaging or publicly accessible social media such as Twitter. In Curwood's research on *The Hunger Games*, social networks were an integral part of the affinity space. Not only did social networks directly link individual fans, they were also a platform to share information about upcoming events in *The Hunger Games* world. In that respect, researchers need to consider how social media shapes the size, scope and evolution of the affinity space.

In affinity space research, informants talk with us about their interests, they share their motivations, and they reflect on their practices. Not only do informants allow us to follow their online trail, they may share their private messages or drafts of their fan-based fiction, art and multimedia. They also may alert us to upcoming changes in the affinity space, such as the emergence of new portals. As researchers, we know that we only gain a narrow understanding of culture by looking at the publicly accessible components of an online affinity space. Our relationships with key informants are critical to providing us with access to rich data and allowing us to understand how young people actively navigate and construct culture in online spaces.

Online ethnography, in many respects, is nascent and few scholars other than Androutsopoulos (2008) have offered protocols for contacting potential informants. In our research, this is complicated by the fact that we are focusing on adolescents. We have found that university ethics committees may demand different approaches to participant recruitment. This may involve the use of a direct message or a general announcement within specific portals. From here, potential informants may be asked to contact the researcher via email or to visit a password-protected site to learn about the study and access consent forms. One ethics committee stipulated that any initial contact with potential participants must specify that they would need parental approval; another ethics committee took the opposite view, lest youth were tempted to lie about their age in order to participate in the study. Consequently, our experiences suggest that there is little consensus on appropriate protocols for contacting and recruiting young people to participate in ethical online research.

The instability and impermanence of web-based environments and artefacts
On the one hand, the semi-permanence of publicly shared art, stories and postings can make it difficult for affinity space researchers to preserve the anonymity of their informants (Androutsopoulos, 2008; Markham & Baym, 2009). On the other, the impermanence of these artefacts can become just as profound a challenge. It is often true that neither participants in affinity space portals nor ethnographers of these spaces have much control over the broader administration, or even existence, of a particular portal and the comments and postings that appear there. Several possible aspects of instability can profoundly affect data collection methods, as well as broader participation by both participants and ethnographers.

Obtaining access to and storing archives of comments made in conversation with other participants can present a methodological challenge. While message-board- or blog-based affinity space portals can make data collection easy because these kinds of software preserve a log of participants' conversations, these tools are not universally used. On *Neopets*, for example, the Neoboard chatboards provide a major site of group conversations. These boards are threaded discussions, much like message boards, but, presumably to preserve server space, the conversations are deleted from the server after a certain amount of time or number of messages. If researchers or participants in these chats want to archive a board's contents, they must take screenshots while the board is active. Once it is cleared (or, "poofs" in *Neopets* slang), there is no way to recover the messages.

In response to this constraint on conversation, many Neopians use several simultaneous technologies to talk with each other: the public Neoboards, less public guild boards, Neomail (a site-specific form of e-mail) and off-site instant messages. An extensive list of words and topics is also forbidden by the site (for example, curse words, anything related to sexuality or dating, anything relating to personal identity, and so on), a restriction that further pushes teen and adult players to speak with each other in off-site venues where conversation is more free. These regulations sometimes led to creative literacy practices that create meaning through innuendo, but more often led to the dispersal and partiality of conversations – and Magnifico's (2010b) heavy reliance on participant interviews and field notes during her fieldwork.

While *Neopets* was the most extreme case of conversational ephemerality, this constraint holds true elsewhere, albeit usually in less intrusive forms. As we discovered in our *Sims* and *Hunger Games* fieldwork, some sites and archives may disappear entirely because owners and administrators decide to abandon a project or move the portal into new territory due to participants' shifting interests. Unlike program-based or school-based ethnographic fieldwork, where calendars are often blocked off months in advance and rigorously maintained by institutions, affinity space portals operate under the will of their participants and may change beyond researchers' control for reasons that may or may not become clear.

Porous boundaries of field sites

The relationship between and among portals in an affinity space is symbiotic in nature. Participants use hyperlinks, blogrolls (hyperlinks to other blogs the participant reads), Facebook status updates and a variety of other means to advertise and connect portals within an affinity space. Thus, making sense of the literacy practices demands researchers follow participants' moving, travelling practices (Leander & McKim, 2003) between and among the portals.

As Lammers (2011) found in her research, *The Sims Writers' Hangout* (*SWH*) was not a repository for *Sims* fan fiction. Instead, members uploaded their creations elsewhere and provided hyperlinks to those locations. Thus, *SWH* was a permeable space, interconnected with other portals housing *Sims* fan fiction, custom content and *Sims* images. The connections between *SWH* and popular portals for hosting *Sims* fan fiction-related creations included corporate-maintained sites, such as the *Exchange*, which hosts content made with and for *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3*. Members also upload their creations to other fan-created portals such

as *The Sims Resource*, member-created blogs and websites, and digital image and video sharing sites such as Flickr, YouTube and Photobucket.

SWH's interconnectivity with these other websites had significant methodological implications. Had Lammers confined her field to only those interactions that took place on the *SWH* discussion board, she would have limited her understanding of what it means for members to participate in the affinity space. To make sense of *SWH* as a culture, and to explore the full nature of literacies and learning in *SWH*, required that she follow informants' hyperlinks to these other portals within the *Sims* affinity space.

DISCUSSION

Affinity spaces offer a rich opportunity to examine adolescent literacy practices in the wild, and to inform both literacy research and literacy pedagogy. Our work highlights some of the possibilities and challenges that accompany affinity space research. In this paper, we have theorised affinity spaces as dynamic, cross-generational and multimodal spaces where individuals come together to critically engage with popular culture, such as literature and games. These spaces offer multiple paths to participation, encourage critical dialogue and provide young people with an authentic audience for their creative endeavours.

Adolescent literacy is profoundly shaped by popular culture, personal motivation and global communication (Curwood & Cowell, 2011). While our research on *The Sims*, *The Hunger Games* and *Neopets* has taken place in out-of-school spaces, it has clear implications for teachers and teacher educators. Over the past three decades, our definition of literacy has changed. While literacy was once defined by the reading and writing of print texts, today, scholars such as Luke and Freebody (1999) propose that literacy involves decoding, making meaning, functionally using texts and critically analysing and transforming texts. These literacy practices are increasingly social, multimodal and digital (Curwood, 2012). Not only do affinity spaces offer insight into such literacy practices, they also show that young people value project-based, self-directed opportunities to share their creative work with an authentic audience. Because adolescents' involvement in these online, global, multimodal literacies draws on school learning and transforms it in active, participatory ways, we argue that research on affinity spaces and new literacies is critically important to literacy educators. The culture of the affinity spaces related to *The Sims*, *The Hunger Games* and *Neopets* fosters creativity, offers multiple paths to participation, and embodies literacy writ large. For literacy researchers, affinity spaces are rich, varied and complex research sites with the potential to inform literacy theory and pedagogy.

At the same time, these spaces are in constant flux. When Gee (2004) first conceptualised affinity spaces, social media such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Tumblr did not exist. Our research indicates that social media is now an intrinsic part of participating in affinity spaces. Moreover, portals to affinity spaces are always emerging, changing and closing. As new tools and spaces are developed and gain traction, the size, scope and practices of affinity spaces will change. Just as literacy researchers call for continued theorising of adolescent literacies in the digital age (Alvermann, 2008; Leu, 2009; Moje, 2009), we believe it is

imperative for researchers to continually theorise affinity spaces and understand how they shape adolescents' literacy practices and meaning-making processes.

To that end, we offer this article as a first step in developing a new methodological framework for studying affinity spaces: affinity space ethnography. We see the potential of building on existing traditions of ethnographic methods and online ethnography to further conceptualise what it means to study the culture and practices of an affinity space. As we have outlined in this paper, affinity space research bears some resemblance to, but also several differences from, traditional, single-sited ethnography. In our future work, we intend to further develop this methodological framework by tracing the conceptual terrain of ethnography and illustrating how the new constitutions of space, time and field made possible by the Internet call for a new mode of ethnography.

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