

“The Hangout was Serious Business:”

Exploring Literacies and Learning in an Online Sims Fan Fiction Community

by

Jayne Catherine Lammers

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Josephine Peyton Marsh, Chair
Elisabeth R. Hayes
James Paul Gee

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the literacy practices members of an online fan community engage in to participate in the space and to question what learning happens through that participation. This dissertation is the product of a two-year virtual ethnographic study of *The Sims Writers' Hangout (SWH)*, a discussion forum website established by fans of *The Sims* to support members' interests in creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. Affinity space theory informs an understanding of *SWH*'s organization, and a definition of literacies as situated, social practices also frames the study. Data were collected following a discourse-centered online ethnographic approach, which guided systematic observation and interactions with eight key informants. The data corpus includes hundreds of pages of discussion forum posts, member profiles, moderator-created norming texts, numerous digital, multimodal *Sims* fan fiction texts, virtual interview responses from informants, field notes, and additional virtual artifacts, such as informants' websites and Flickr[®] photostreams.

Study results are presented within three separate manuscripts prepared for publication and presentation, each exploring different lines of inquiry related to *SWH*. Chapter 3 focuses on tensions visible in the forum discussions to argue for an expansion of affinity space theory that accounts for the "hanging out" members do in the space. Chapter 4 analyzes one informant's literacy practices using a Design perspective. This analysis reveals the collaborative nature of *Sims* fan fiction literacies. The final manuscript (Chapter 5) offers an analysis of *SWH* pedagogy using Bernstein's pedagogic device concept. Data illustrate how pedagogic discourse in this online, informal learning space aligns with and challenges Bernstein's theory. Finally, Chapter 6 offers conclusions about how these three analyses expand our understanding of adolescent

literacies and 21st century learning. This chapter also contains implications for theory and practice, recommendations for future research, and reflections on lessons learned.

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GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Term	Explanation
anime	A Japanese style cartoon or animated movie used by some as inspiration for fan fiction creations.
Bodyshop	A software tool used to create Sims, giving the player options to customize a Sims' gender, age group, eyes, hair, clothing, etc. Though it is a separate program from the video game, it was included on <i>The Sims™ 2</i> DVD.
<i>Chit Chat</i>	An <i>SWH</i> forum with this description: "This board is for the regular chit chat. Just chit and chat." It contained more than half of all posts in <i>SWH</i> , numbering over 380,000 on May 12, 2010. It is a socializing space, with sub-boards such as <i>Games, Quizzes, Jokes & Randomness</i> and <i>Relationships, Relationships, Relationships</i> . See Chapter 3 for a discussion of <i>Chit Chat</i> and the tensions revealed by members' thoughts about its value in <i>SWH</i> .
custom content	A commonly-used term within gaming communities to refer to content created by players, as opposed to the off-the-shelf content produced by game designers, that is often made available for download into others' games. For <i>The Sims™</i> video games, custom content includes items such as clothing, hairstyles, skins, buildings, and home furnishings. Many <i>The Sims™</i> custom content creators adapt clothing seen in magazines or create a Sim based on a famous person as custom content for one's game.
deviantART	An online social networking site that connects artists and allows them to display their work (http://www.deviantart.com/). One of my informants, Zahrah, displayed her <i>Sims</i> creations on deviantART.
<i>Exchange</i>	A depository for custom content, Sims, and <i>Sims</i> fan fiction created with <i>The Sims™ 2</i> (http://thesims2.ea.com/exchange/). It is a part of the official Electronic Arts-created website for <i>The Sims™ 2</i> , and has functionality that allows players to upload stories created in the game's Story Mode for display online. This is a popular site used by members of <i>SWH</i> to host their <i>Sims</i> fan fiction. Many of my informants first heard about <i>SWH</i> by reading other members' <i>Sims</i> fan fiction on the <i>Exchange</i> .
fan fiction	Fictional texts created by fans and derived from their fandom of a particular media such as a television show, movie, book, anime or manga series, or video game.

Flickr [®]	A website for storing and sharing photos (http://www.flickr.com/). A user's collection of photos on Flickr [®] is called a "photostream." Many <i>SWH</i> members, and most of my informants, use Flickr [®] to store and share digital images from <i>The Sims</i> [™] . The site gives users the capability to connect with others through groups and contacts. <i>SWH</i> has a Flickr [®] group at http://www.flickr.com/groups/sims2/ .
GIMP	A freely distributed software program used to edit and retouch digital images, available at http://www.gimp.org/ . This alternative to Adobe [®] Photoshop [®] is the digital-image editing program used by some members of <i>SWH</i> .
Hangout Helper	A designation given to lower-level moderators in <i>SWH</i> . These members are responsible for moderating assigned forums on the site, but do not have the behind-the-scenes access to change the structure or appearance of the site. Hangout Helper is displayed on these members' profiles and discussion forum posts.
machinima	A fan literacy practice of producing animated films using the 3-D graphics engines in video games. One of my informants, Eve, was an avid creator of <i>Sims</i> machinima.
manga	A Japanese style of graphic novel or comics used by some as inspiration for fan fiction creations.
modding	A commonly-used term within gaming communities for modifying the content or structure of a game. (See custom content.)
Senior Staff	A designation given to the head moderators in <i>SWH</i> . These members are responsible for moderating assigned forums on the site. Senior Staff have the access necessary to make changes to the structure and appearance of the site. Two of my informants, Missy and Pamela, held this rank in the space and Senior Staff displayed on their profiles and discussion forum posts.
Sims	Sims are the virtual characters, models, game avatars that players create in <i>The Sims</i> [™] video games. I use the un-italicized "Sims" to indicate when I am referring to the game's characters.

<i>Sims</i> fan fiction	A fan literacy practice of producing multimodal, hybrid texts pairing images and words together to tell stories using <i>The Sims</i> [™] to visually represent the characters and settings. <i>The Sims</i> [™] 2 has a Story Mode in the game that can be used create stories to upload to the <i>Exchange</i> (as in the example shared in Appendix A). <i>The Sims</i> [™] 3 players have access to a web-based tool (at http://www.thesims3.com/moviesandmore) that allows them to create and display their stories online. However, some <i>Sims</i> fan fiction authors only use <i>The Sims</i> [™] to create the images for stories that they host on their own website or blog.
<i>The Sims</i> [™]	A life simulation video game created by designer Will Wright and published by Electronic Arts (EA), <i>The Sims</i> [™] was released in 2000. Since then, several different versions of and expansion packs for the game have been released (including <i>The Sims</i> [™] 2 in 2004 and <i>The Sims</i> [™] 3 in 2009). <i>The Sims</i> series has become the most popular PC game of all time, selling more than 125 million copies worldwide by February, 2010 (EA Play Label, 2010). Except for cases when I refer to a specific game in the series, I use “ <i>The Sims</i> ” to mean any, or all, game(s) in the series.
<i>The Sims Resource</i> (TSR)	A popular fan community (http://www.thesimsresource.com/) for sharing <i>The Sims</i> [™] custom content.
<i>The Sims Writers’ Hangout</i> (SWH)	A discussion forum-based online affinity space (http://similik.proboards.com/), <i>SWH</i> is the site of my research project. It began in 2005 as a small Yahoo! [®] Group of <i>The Sims</i> [™] fans who shared an interest in writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction. For a more complete description of <i>SWH</i> , see Chapter 2.
thread	In online discussion forum sites such as <i>SWH</i> , a set of connected posts, or a conversation, is called a thread. The categories of threads most often mentioned in this dissertation include story threads (in which <i>Sims</i> fan fiction is shared through hyperlinks and discussed by the author and readers), idea threads (in which incomplete stories are shared as ideas for feedback), and <i>Chit Chat</i> threads (in which socializing occurs).

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of the Dissertation

My dissertation is a collection of three published or publishable, stand-alone manuscripts bookended by introductory and concluding chapters. In this first chapter, I situate my study within the larger context of fan fiction and online fan community research, present a rationale for pursuing the line of inquiry I did, and articulate the overarching theoretical lenses that framed my study. In Chapter 2, I present an overview of the methodological perspectives that shaped my study and describe the design I implemented. I also describe the research site and the eight key informants whose insights most informed my understanding.

Following those introductory chapters, I present the three manuscripts, in their submitted form. Each presents a separate analysis of the data collected. Chapter 3, titled *“Is the Hangout...The Hangout?” Exploring tensions in an online gaming-related fan site*, is an analysis of the site’s organization, exploring how the site does, and does not, function as an affinity space (Gee, 2004). I focus on the moments of tension that arose as members and moderators negotiated their participation within *The Sims Writers’ Hangout (SWH)*. Chapter 4, titled *Collaborative literacies: Studying Sims fan fiction from a Design perspective*, is an analysis of the literacies members recruit to participate in *SWH*. Specifically, data were analyzed using the New London Group’s (1996) “Designs of Meaning” theory. Applying a Design lens to data made visible the ways in which one informant’s *Sims* fan fiction literacies were collaborative and crossed boundaries of online and offline spaces. Chapter 5, titled *Rethinking language in an online fan community: A pedagogic discourse perspective*, focuses on the pedagogy of *SWH* using Bernstein’s pedagogic device concept (1990; 1996; 2000; 2004). This framework made

visible how pedagogical interactions in this online, informal learning environment align with and challenge Bernstein's model.

In the final chapter of my dissertation, I step back from individual analyses to draw conclusions from the study as a whole. I discuss implications about literacies and learning that contribute to our understanding of what 21st century learning environments can and should be. I also offer reflections related to the on-going discussion of ethics in online research and what I learned from conducting this research. To continue this introduction, I now begin to describe the context for my research.

Situating My Research

As adolescents spend increasing amounts of time online (Zickuhr, 2010), they engage in new social practices involving reading, writing, and other modes of communication (i.e. digital image sharing, social networking). Educational researchers continue to call for increased study of the literacy practices recruited for participation in online spaces. Leu (2009) points to the importance of capturing the continuous change happening as the Internet impacts our literacy lives (see also Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009). Moje (2009) calls for research that further develops our conceptualizations of new media and the new literacies they demand. Alvermann (2008) encourages researchers to move beyond merely discussing Internet-related practices to theorizing the implications they may have for classroom teachers, teacher educators, and researchers focused on adolescent students. These calls for continued study of literacies associated with participation in online spaces serve as the rationale for my dissertation. My study answers these calls, and contributes to our understanding of adolescent literacies visible in a gaming-related online affinity space (Gee, 2004).

My dissertation research is not a study of the video game *The Sims*^{TM1}, per se. Rather, by focusing on the practices associated with creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in *SWH*, my research is a study of the gaming beyond the game (Gee & Hayes, 2010). My study explores literacies and learning around *The Sims* to make sense of how an online affinity space supports these practices. To further situate my research, I first define *Sims* fan fiction.

Defining Sims Fan Fiction

The Sims series of video games is the most popular PC game of all time, selling more than 125 million copies worldwide by the franchise's tenth anniversary in February 2010 (EA Play Label, 2010). A life simulation game, *The Sims* invites players to create families, design homes, build communities, and interact in an open-ended platform 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 downloaded into an individual's game. A widespread network of online fan sites has developed to support this practice, where gamers upload and download content, discuss their game play, issue challenges, share cheat codes, and much more. Drawing from this network of fans, Electronic Arts (EA) game designers have incorporated fans' ideas and practices into subsequent releases of and expansion packs for *The Sims*.

One gaming practice that caused EA to take notice was the way fans documented their *Sims*' lives. The original game design of *The Sims* did not have a built-in functionality for taking pictures while playing the game. However, fans were taking screen captures of their *Sims* as they engaged in everyday activities and pairing them

¹ I acknowledge that *The Sims*TM is trademarked by Electronic Arts; However, for ease of readability, I will not include the TM symbol in my repeated use of the name throughout this dissertation.

with written captions, much like a family photo album, and sharing them in fan spaces. When *The Sims 2* was released in 2004, the game design included a Story Mode. This gave players camera, album, and blog tools that allowed them to take snapshots and add text to accompany these snapshots. EA also created a means for *The Sims* fans to share these stories on their website, <http://thesims2.ea.com/>, using the *Exchange* (See Appendix A for a sample of *Sims* fan fiction from the *Exchange*). Creating stories became a popular fan gaming practice, and more than 167,000 stories have been posted on the *Exchange* (May 12, 2010). With the release of *The Sims 3* in June 2009, the practice evolved again when EA moved the story tools out of the game and to their website (<http://www.thesims3.com/moviesandmore>). Online, fans have access to point-and-click design tools, such as music for soundtracks and transitions between pages, to enhance their creations. As of May 12, 2010, there were more than 48,000 stories created on *The Sims 3* website.

The Sims fans create multimodal (Kress, 2003; Kress & Jewitt, 2003), hybrid (New London Group, 1996) texts of a variety of genres. Popular genres include modding tutorials with instructions for posing Sims for snapshots and game play tutorials offering tips for meeting Sims' aspirations. Other fans create Sims Life Stories, as they are known on the *Exchange*, which document the interactions of their Sims. Still others create fictional romance, horror, or mystery stories, using Sims to represent the characters in the narratives they write. Many fans create serialized fictional stories that continue through numerous chapters or episodes. Finally, some *The Sims* fans display their fandom for other media through the stories they create. Vampire romance stories, inspired by Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), are one very popular genre of *Sims* fan fiction.

Fan fiction – fictional texts created by fans and derived from their fandom of a particular media such as a television show, movie, book, anime or manga series, or video game – is a popular form of media production with a history that predates the online spaces that emerged to support the practice (Black, 2005; Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Jenkins, 1992). *Sims* fan fiction is a fan literacy practice of producing multimodal (Kress, 2003; Kress & Jewitt, 2003), hybrid (New London Group, 1996) texts that pair images and words together to tell stories using *The Sims* to visually represent the characters and settings. I coined the phrase “*Sims* fan fiction” to recognize multiple types of fandom *The Sims* players, specifically those who are *SWH* members, engage in when creating these texts. It acknowledges that some players incorporate characters and storylines from other media into their *Sims* fan fiction. Most importantly, it honors *The Sims* fandom displayed when authors select this video game platform as the tool with which they tell their stories.

Review of Literature

To connect my study with relevant conversations in the research, I continue by reviewing what we already know about studying fan fiction and about studying online fan communities.

Studying Fan Fiction

Fan fiction is a popular form of media production that began long before online communities existed to support the practice. The earliest forms of fan fiction date back to fan art and fanzines created by science fiction fans in the early 1930’s. Media fandom, in particular, developed in the 1960’s around the television shows *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Star Trek* (Coppa, 2006). In one of the first academic explorations of fan fiction, Jenkins (1992) found that fans displayed their fandom in a variety of forms, producing stories, art, performances, songs, and movies, blurring “any clear-cut distinction between

media producer and media spectator, since any spectator may potentially participate in the creation of new artworks” (p. 247).

With the advent of the Internet and the numerous online communities developing around fan fiction, online fan fiction practices continue to gain recognition as an area of research. Jenkins (2006a) shared the story of Heather, a home-schooled teenager so inspired by how the *Harry Potter* books were encouraging kids to read that she launched *The Daily Prophet*, an online school newspaper for the fictional Hogwarts, to encourage kids to write. Heather managed a staff of more than 100 children worldwide, who each created a fictional identity inspired by the books and produced fan fiction news stories of the imaginary school they constructed together. Thomas’ (2006; 2007a; 2007b) study of two female youth engaged in a collaborative, hybrid form of role-playing and fan fiction shed light on how “their writing crosses a range of online and offline spaces, and extends into the production of multimodal texts” (Thomas, 2007b, p. 160). Creating fan art, such as paintings and manga-style graphic novels, and fan-based songs, known as “FILK,” these girls extended their fan fiction narratives in a manner that Thomas described as mono-polymorphic, indicative of a single narrative “[traversing] a range of media, styles, genres, and time to become a single rich and complex narrative” (p. 160).

Much of the research into adolescents’ online fan fiction practices has implications for literacy educators. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) sought to make sense of two middle school girls’ fan fiction writing to better “understand youth culture and make school literacy instruction more responsive to learners’ needs” (p. 557). Their study of Rhiannon and Eileen’s creative process revealed how the girls engaged in online reading and viewing of anime, inspiring their own collaborative, multimodal fan fiction creations displayed on their own webpages. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar argued that students’ interests and skills around fan fiction could be “tapped” by teachers as one way

to “reposition some adolescents as capable literacy learners” (p. 565). Rebecca Black’s (2005; 2007; 2008) work also posited lessons schools could learn from fan fiction. Her ethnographic study of fanfiction.net yielded insights into how this website served as a space for English language learners (ELLs) to participate in authentic writing practices that led to increased access to and affiliation with identities as English writers.

Fanfiction.net afforded these ELLs access to an audience of networked readers from around the world who scaffolded their language learning through the peer review process, teaching and learning in ways not typically available in school-based settings.

Relatively little research of *Sims*-related fan fiction exists. Stein’s (2006) essay on “fannish” storytelling introduced the fan practice of creating *Harry Potter*-inspired narratives illustrated in *The Sims* and posted on LiveJournal.com. She described how *The Sims* video game platform, which emphasizes Sims’ family interactions inside the home, allowed *Harry Potter* fans to explore characters’ domestic lives in ways that extended the novels. Additionally, visual representations of *Harry Potter* characters created within *The Sims* “[emphasized] the expansiveness of fan imagination rather than the limitations of canon, specifically overthrowing any reign of the *Harry Potter* films as canonical for characters’ physical appearances” (p. 256). In another exploration of *Sims* fan fiction, Gee and Hayes (2010) juxtaposed a teen *Sims* fan fiction author on *SWH*, Alex, with Stephenie Meyer, author of the popular *Twilight* series of vampire fiction on which Alex based her fan fiction. By focusing on the relationship each author had with her fans in online spaces, Gee and Hayes illustrated the ways in which “Stephenie and Alex, as writers and readers, professionals and amateurs, are closer than such types of people have ever been before” (p. 144).

Studying Online Fan Communities

Researchers offer various labels to describe and theorize the online places where people gather around shared interests, including knowledge cultures (Lévy, 1997), virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000), participatory cultures (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Weigel, & Robison, 2006), and networked publics (Ito, et al., 2010). These spaces exist around numerous interests, such as health issues, politics, and media fandom. In blogs, discussion boards, newsgroups, media sharing sites, and other websites, fans meet to share in their fandom of television shows, movies, books, anime and manga series, video games, etc. As these online fan spaces become more prevalent, researchers in communications (Baym, 2000; 2007; Watson, 1997), media studies (Jenkins, 1992; 2006a; 2006b; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Weigel, & Robison, 2006), and education (Black, 2008; Foerst, 2008; Gee, 2004; Tobin, 1999) seek to make sense of them.

Online fan spaces can be sites where people develop meaningful friendships with other fans whom they may never meet face-to-face. In her study of a Usenet newsgroup of soap opera fans, Baym (2000) described how strangers became friends as they exchanged messages analyzing and commenting on the episodes and characters in their favorite daytime soaps. In posting their messages about the soap operas, the group exhibited an “ethic of friendliness” (p. 121) constructed through various social norms developed within the group. This friendship extended beyond their fandom as participants exchange messages of congratulations on weddings and births, as well as messages of support during personal tragedies. Tobin (1999) also addressed the notion of friendship in his exploration of what constitutes a “real” friend as his son, Isaac, interacted online with other fans of *Warhammer 40,000*. From the 15-year-old’s perspective, his fellow *Warhammer 40,000* fans were friends, whereas his parents expressed concerns about whether or not online interactions could serve to develop

meaningful friendships. Isaac saw no need to meet face-to-face or to know personal information about these people to cultivate friendships: “Those things have nothing to do with our conversations. I know the people I write to from what they write to me and the list. That’s all that matters to me” (p. 122).

In addition to facilitating friendships, these online groups can function as collaborative learning environments. Black (2007) offered an analysis that contrasts learning in an online fan space with classroom learning, noting that on FanFiction.net, fans have opportunities to take on “meaningful social roles and to shape the content and interactional organization of the space” (p. 393) – opportunities not typically available to students in classrooms. Watson (1997) pointed to both the “wealth of prepared information” (p. 105) and the diverse knowledge of the group as resources for those who come to online groups for answers to questions related to their fandom.

To supplement the research centering on single, bounded online spaces where fans gather, others note that fan spaces can also consist of numerous interconnected websites, discussion boards, and listservs. Baym (2007) offered an analysis of Swedish Indie music fandom describing fan participation as occurring through a distributed, “quasi-coherent” network of sites, rather than in the centralized online groups of the past. Similarly, Tobin (1999) described his son’s participation in *Warhammer 40,000* fandom as occurring through a variety of e-mail lists, as well as through creating and engaging on other related websites.

Much of the available research highlights ways in which well-functioning online sites (or networks) support participants by providing engaging sites for friendly interaction, learning, and collaboration. Examples of moments of tension and conflict in online fan groups are mentioned only rarely in the research. One example is in an analysis of Phish.net, an online discussion group of 50,000 fans of the band Phish;

Watson (1997) discussed strategies participants employed to deal with the loss of intimacy that comes with increased population of the group. As the group grew larger, Phish.netters developed “tools for the maintenance of intimacy, behavioral norms, and values” (p. 116). Other references to disharmony in online fan sites often center on the practice of ‘flaming,’ or yelling at someone through a post. Watson explained, participants often become aware of the shared norms of an online group through “the inevitable first ‘flame’ or personal message from a more experienced member who attempts to inform the user of where they crossed the line of acceptability for that group” (p. 111). More often, references to flaming in the literature offer illustrations of how online fan groups create a culture that discourages flaming (Baym, 2000; Black, 2005; Bury, 2005).

My analyses of *SWH* contribute to what we already know about fan fiction and online fan communities by making sense of the literacies and learning associated with members’ creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction.

Why I Study Sims Fan Fiction

During the 2008 spring semester, I began working as a research assistant for Dr. Elisabeth Hayes’ TechSavvy Girls project (Hayes, King, Johnson, & Lammers, 2008). The project aimed to use *The Sims 2* video game as a starting point for developing information technology (IT) fluency (National Research Council, 1999) for girls with limited prior computer experience. Specifically, we partnered with a local Boys and Girls Club of America to mentor girls in grades 5 through 8 in an afterschool gaming club (Hayes, King, Lammers, & Johnson, 2009). Using the computer lab facilities available in the club’s Intel Computer Clubhouse, we met with the girls regularly over the course of four semesters. Our weekly, or twice weekly in the summer time, sessions included time for free play, mini-lessons teaching computer programs such as Adobe®

Photoshop[®], guided exploration of *Sims* fan sites, and challenges asking the girls to complete tasks in their games. All the while, the girls blogged to capture what they were learning and doing with *The Sims 2*.

During the course of the project, we mentors began to focus on ways in which some players in fan sites used *The Sims* to create stories. We showed the girls examples we found on sites such as *The Sims Resource* (www.thesimsresource.com) and the *Exchange* (www.thesims2.ea.com/exchange). One of these examples included an advertisement for another fan site, *SWH*. I followed the hyperlink and discovered that *SWH* was a discussion forum with more than 12,000 members who had collectively created a space for sharing stories, linking to resources, and supporting each other's interest in *Sims* stories. *SWH* became a valuable resource as I mentored the TechSavvy Girls. Stories from the site served both as reading material for their enjoyment and "mentor texts" (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007; Ray, 2002), or models for their own creations. The girls were especially intrigued by the attractive story covers authors created with *The Sims 2*. Creating their own digitally-edited story cover became the culminating project of our fall 2008 TechSavvy Girls session. I watched as the girls engaged in the process of juxtaposing *The Sims 2* images with text and other images to create attention-grabbing story covers that would attract readers (See Figure 1). After weeks of design work, the TechSavvy Girls displayed their story covers for parents and later a couple of the girls joined us to present their work at a local literacy conference (Lee & Lammers, 2009).

The opportunity to watch the girls' engagement with reading and creating *Sims*-inspired stories made me want to know more about the practice. In particular, I was interested in understanding the role of fan sites such as *SWH* in shaping the stories that members created. I witnessed, on a very small scale, how we leveraged such a site as a

resource for the girls' *Sims* creations. The experience left me wondering if, and how, other *Sims* storywriters used *SWH* as a resource. I also had an interest in making sense of the literacies participants used to interact on the site and to create their *Sims* stories.

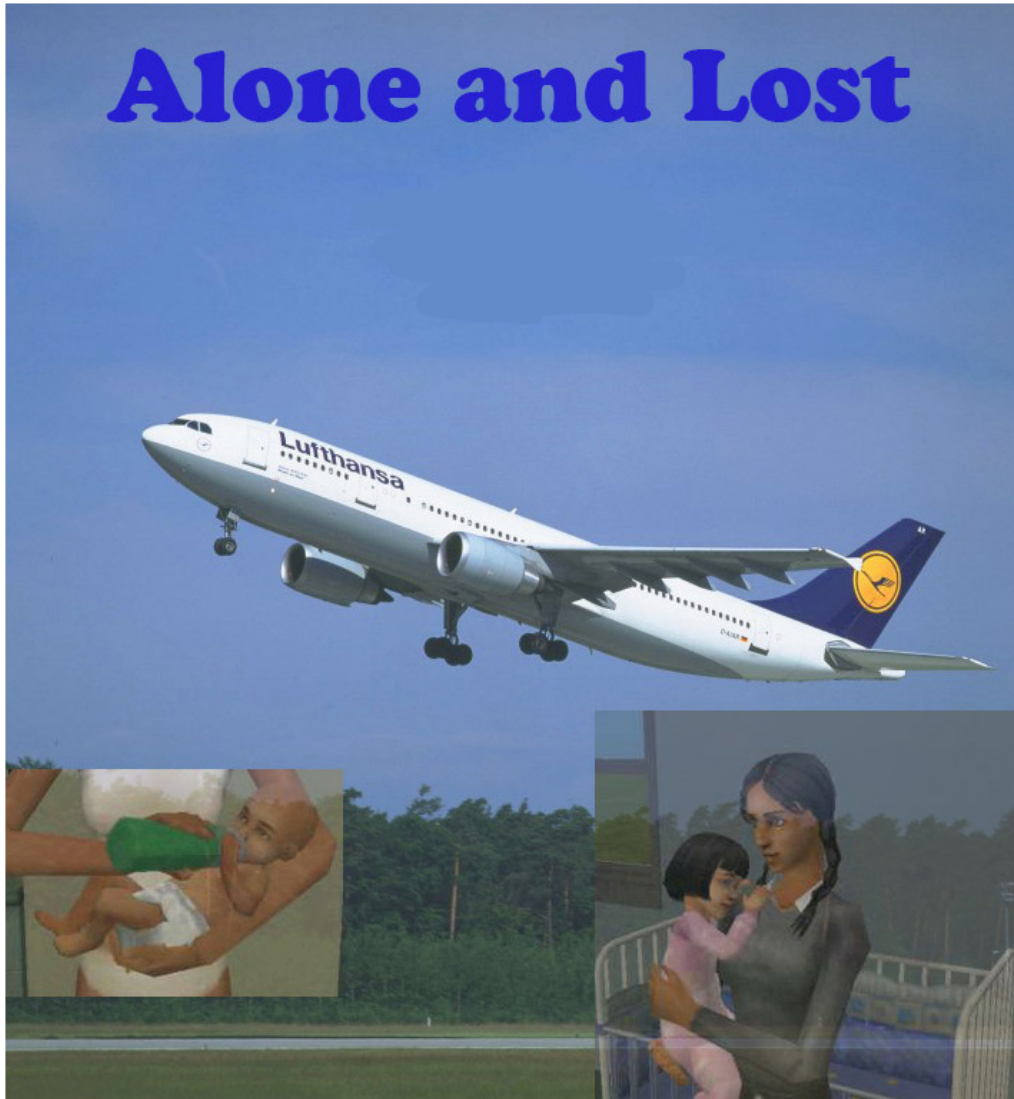


Figure 1. Story cover created by a TechSavvy Girl. This image juxtaposes images from *The Sims 2* and the Internet to create an eye-catching cover for her *Sims* fan fiction. I altered the image to remove her name.

During this time, I was also involved in an investigation of adult women's IT learning related to their participation as Featured Artists on the fan site *The Sims Resource* (Hayes, King, & Lammers, 2008). Through virtual interviews, we asked

twenty-six women to share what and how they learned to create custom content for *The Sims 2*. Our analysis of their responses explored three questions: (a) What motivates women to initiate and persist in this learning? (b) What trajectories of expertise development do they pursue? and (c) How do they use technologically mediated environments, in particular, fan communities, to support their learning? We found the women were motivated by a variety of different factors that led to their interest-driven learning trajectories related to creating custom content for the game. The women's participation in online communities was another important factor in their learning because such sites gave them a space to connect with others and acquire "tech-savvy" identities (p. 4).

These two research experiences generated more questions for me about the nature of the literacies associated with participation in fan communities. I had a desire to make sense of the literacy practices in which *The Sims* players engaged and wondered what implications those practices have for adolescent literacy theory and instruction.

Purpose of the Study

Leadbeater and Miller (2004) argue that the 21st century will be shaped not by elite professionals who had power in the past, but by a "new breed...[of] innovative, committed, and networked amateurs working to professional standards" (p. 9). My initial exploration of *SWH* led me to believe that members of this space might exemplify this "new breed." The purpose of this study is to explore the literacy practices that members of *SWH*, an online fan community, engage in to participate in the space and to question what learning happens as part and parcel of that participation. The goal of this research is to inform our understanding of adolescent literacies and 21st century learning.

My dissertation was guided by the following overarching research questions:

1. How is *SWH*, an online affinity space, organized to create a collaborative learning environment?
 - a. How does this space create and promote high standards for literacy learning?
 - b. How does participation in this space shape the creation of participants' *Sims* fan fiction?
2. What is the nature of the multimodal literacies recruited by this space?

Theoretical Concepts Framing this Study

I use affinity space theory (Gee, 2004) as the lens through which I view the organization of *SWH* and a definition of literacies as situated, social practices to frame the study. I briefly explain those two concepts here to set up the study.

Affinity Space

Gee's (2004) "affinity space" concept serves as the construct I used for making sense of how *SWH* is organized. Gee characterizes affinity spaces as sites of informal learning where "newbies and masters and everyone else" interact around a "common endeavor" (p. 85). Gee argues that this common endeavor provides the unity in an affinity space, rather than shared geography, age, or other social factors. In *SWH*, interest in *The Sims* games, and more specifically in *Sims* fan fiction-related practices, brings participants to the space. Gee puts forward his notion of a "paradigmatic" affinity space by presenting how eleven distinct features are visible within a particular gaming site (See Table 1 for a list of these features and how they are visible in *SWH*). I explain the three features of particular relevance to my study of *Sims* fan fiction in further detail below. Before continuing, I want to address my use of the term "members" when referring to those people who participate in *SWH*. Though Gee problematizes the notion of membership in his discussion of affinity spaces, I use "members" when referring to the

participants in *SWH* for two reasons. First, the site calls its participants “members.” Secondly, the site requires people to register, and receive administrative approval for an account before gaining access to the forum.

Table 1

Affinity Space Features as Visible in SWH

Feature Defining an Affinity Space	Feature as Visible in <i>SWH</i>
“Common endeavor, not race, class, gender, or disability, is primary.”	<i>Sims</i> fan fiction-related practices serve as the shared affinity attracting members from all over the world to <i>SWH</i> .
“Newbies and masters and everyone else share common space.”	The range of experience is visible in members’ profiles, which record their “date registered.” Newbies, who joined that day, can interact with founding members who have been on the site since 2005.
“Some portals are strong generators.”	As a portal to the larger affinity space of <i>Sims</i> , <i>SWH</i> is a strong generator of fan fiction content by providing a space devoted to the practice and through <i>SWH</i> contests, which generate numerous creations.
“Content organization is transformed by interactional organization.”	Though not specific to <i>SWH</i> , the fan practice of creating <i>Sims</i> fan fiction has informed design decisions in various ways, namely, the inclusion of the Story Mode in <i>The Sims 2</i> , and the web-based Create a Story tool for <i>The Sims 3</i> . Custom content, used in creating fan fiction texts, is another means of transforming the game.
“Both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged.”	<i>SWH</i> forums are organized around various specialized topics, encouraging the development and sharing of intensive knowledge about practices such as custom content, digital photo editing, and proofreading. Members display broader, extensive knowledge of story writing practices through their <i>Sims</i> fan fiction creations.

“Both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged.”	<i>SWH</i> provides lists of resources, links to custom content, tutorials, a <i>Where Can I Find?</i> sub-forum, and reviews of and links to other <i>Sims</i> -related sites, all of which creates a vast network of distributed knowledge with which <i>SWH</i> members can connect their individual knowledge to create <i>Sims</i> fan fiction.
“Dispersed knowledge is encouraged.”	<i>SWH</i> members draw on knowledge dispersed across a range of <i>Sims</i> -related sites, as well as from other media and from knowledge of writers’ craft, photography, image editing, etc.
“Tacit knowledge is encouraged and honored.”	Reviewing others’ <i>Sims</i> fan fiction provides one means for displaying one’s tacit knowledge built up in their own practice as a creator and reader of <i>Sims</i> fan fiction.
“There are many different forms and routes to participation.”	<i>SWH</i> provides a space for members to participate in a variety of ways, including as moderators, lurkers, chit chatters, proofreaders, fan fiction creators, fans, contest entrants, and request fillers.
“There are lots of different routes to status.”	Routes to status in <i>SWH</i> include having a popular fan fiction series, serving as a moderator, and engaging in regular posting in the forums.
“Leadership is porous and leaders are resources.”	While <i>SWH</i> does have moderators who serve as bosses in the forums, other informal leaders include those members who guide forum discussions with their posts and those who lead by offering their expertise in various ways.

Note. Features are quoted from Gee (2004, p. 85-87).

One critical feature defining an online fan community as an affinity space is the opportunities participants have to enact “different forms and routes to participation” (Gee, 2004, p. 87). As such, affinity spaces provide “powerful opportunities for learning...because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 177). These diverse types of participation exist in *SWH*. The site is organized into forums catering to different purposes related to community-

building and creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction (See Appendix B for a description of each forum). Members can engage in passive participation by lurking, or viewing and reading the content without posting anything of their own. Members can also take up more active forms of participation by posting fan fiction, critiques, and praise for others' creations, or by serving as a resource for others asking questions about creating *Sims* fan fiction. Still others engage in the space by serving leadership roles as moderators of forums and/or contests. All forms and routes to participation are available to the members of *SWH*, allowing their skills and interests to guide their engagement with the space.

The ways in which “both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged” (Gee, 2004, p. 85) are also relevant to this analysis. In affinity spaces, displays of expertise “are highly variable and contingent on activity and context at any given moment” (Black, 2008, p. 39), thus participants may have knowledge about one aspect of creating *Sims* fan fiction, but not about others. *SWH* encourages members to display, gain, and leverage “intensive,” or specialized, knowledge around various aspects of *Sims* fan fiction. For example, posing Sims for a photo, much like in real life photography, is an important element of capturing the images for these multimodal fan fictions. There are forums in *SWH* devoted to sharing photo-taking advice in which members display their intensive knowledge of the practice by creating tutorials, answering others' questions, and sharing posing cheat codes. *Sims* fan fiction authors can develop their own intensive knowledge around this practice from these resources, or leverage the knowledge of others by asking experts to create photos for them. These ways demonstrate how specialized knowledge is valued in the space. In addition, members display “extensive,” or broad, knowledge about story writing and *The Sims* as they create their fan fictions and share them for others to read. The practices associated with creating

and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in *SWH* engage members in the forums in ways that encourage displaying, gaining, and leveraging both intensive and extensive knowledge.

Finally, the ways that “both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged” (Gee, 2004, p. 86) in affinity spaces informs this analysis. Members of an affinity space have the opportunity to demonstrate their individual knowledge through participation. As they participate, their knowledge then becomes part of the distributed and shared knowledge of the group, shaping future interactions and creations (Black, 2007). *SWH* members display their individual knowledge in a variety of ways. First and foremost, fan fiction texts demonstrate not only one’s individual knowledge and skills related to *The Sims*, but also writing and oftentimes, digital image editing. Members might also create tutorials or answer others’ questions, helping to create the distributed knowledge available in the space. As members draw on these resources, they tap into the distributed knowledge of others in the space and within the other sites linked to *SWH*. “Such knowledge allows people to know and do more than they could on their own” (Gee, 2004, p. 86).

Literacies as Situated, Social Practices

The broad perspectives of sociocultural and situated approaches to learning inform the orientation I bring to my research on *SWH*. My sociocultural approach is rooted in Vygotsky’s (1962; 1978) work, who argues that social interaction plays a fundamental role in learning. I also draw on Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of the situatedness of learning, which emphasizes “comprehensive understanding involving the whole person” and learning as a social process of engaging in activity “in and with the world” as the learner, the learning, and “the world mutually constitute each other” (p. 33). Thus, I perceive learning to be both contextualized in and developing out of social interaction.

In line with this sociocultural perspective, I view literacies as situated, social practices. I acknowledge the situatedness of literacies, as do others (Barton, 2007; Gee, 2004; 2008; Heath, 1983; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007), recognizing that literacy practices influence and are influenced by the contexts in which they occur. Heath (1983) made this argument clear in highlighting how the social practices of two different Carolina communities shaped the communication of their residents. Similarly, Lankshear and Knobel (2007) spoke of different texts requiring different backgrounds to be “read meaningfully” (p. 2) and Barton (2007) stated that “there is not one way of reading and writing, there is not one set of practices” (p. 37). Those who have theorized video game practices as literacy practices also inform my understanding of literacies as situated. Steinkuehler (2007), in her analysis of literacies in massively multiplayer online games, argued that the sense-making of the numerous texts, images, symbols, and sounds within the game is made possible when players have enough experience to make meaning “transparent.” Squire (2008) spoke of the ways in which written texts serve as resources to support specific digital-gaming practices. Applying a situated conceptualization of literacies to *SWH* demands that I recognize that these literacies situated in the context of the affinity space, as co-created by its members.

In addition, I acknowledge the social nature of literacies. Literacy practices are embedded into the institutions in ways that are connected to wider social, economic, political, and cultural practices (Grillo, 1989, as cited in Wiley, 1996). This understanding reveals the politics of those connected practices and impacts which literacies are honored. I use politics here as did Gee (2008), to say that politics determine the distribution of social goods and validate what is appropriate and desired within a social context. Recognizing the social nature of literacy also demands that I attend to the ways in which literacy “is a social process, in which particular socially constructed

technologies are used within particular institutional frameworks for specific social purposes” (Street, 1984, p. 97). Literacies are more than the technology utilized in the practices – i.e. writing is more than the pen/paper/keyboard; reading is more than the book/on-screen text. Engaging in a literacy practice means using available technologies and symbol systems to make meaning (Moje, 2009; Scribner & Cole, 1981). *SWH* members participate with literacy practices that have social meanings symbolic of their solidarity to the social practices of the site (Barton, 2007).

Together, these theoretical conceptualizations of *SWH* as an affinity space and literacies as situated, social practices form the prism through which I collected and interpreted data for this study.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGICAL OVERVIEW

I designed this study to answer the following questions:

1. How is *SWH*, an online affinity space, organized to create a collaborative learning environment?
 - a. How does this space create and promote high standards for literacy learning?
 - b. How does participation in this space shape the creation of participants' *Sims* fan fiction?
2. What is the nature of the multimodal literacies recruited by this space?

To answer these questions, I engaged in a two-year virtual ethnography of *The Sims Writers' Hangout (SWH)*. The results of my study are presented in the next three chapters as published or publishable presentations of the data. Each chapter contains a brief description of the research context and process, and provides details for how data were analyzed for each piece. Submission guidelines and word limits for various publication venues forced me to be concise, restricting the amount of methodological detail I could provide, particularly regarding my informants and the data collection process. Therefore, I use this chapter to provide a more detailed description of the research methods employed in my study.

I begin with a discussion of the methodological perspectives informing the study's design. I continue by describing *SWH* as a research context and include profiles introducing each of my key informants. Finally, I elucidate the data collection process and explain each type of data source. I did not include data analysis procedures in this chapter, as they varied for each component of the study. Thus, I explain analysis procedures used in their respective chapters.

Methodological Perspectives

I used qualitative research methods because I sought “answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 4). I wanted to make sense of how members socially constructed *SWH* and attempt to understand what that space meant to them. I approached my research from an interpretivist stance with an eye towards understanding the complexities of the space from the members’ point of view (Schwandt, 1994). Thus, I valued using a “naturalistic” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) form of inquiry that required me to immerse myself in the space for an extended period of time and elicit informants’ insights. To further articulate the perspectives informing my study’s design, I continue with a discussion of ethnographic research before focusing specifically on virtual ethnographic research.

Ethnographic Research

Originating in anthropology, ethnography describes both the process and the product of a qualitative form of research. Ethnography as a process is the social scientific study of a phenomenon with a focus on human behavior (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Ethnography emphasizes making sense of the nature of particular social phenomena, rather than testing hypotheses about them (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Features of ethnographic research include working with unstructured data not coded at the point of collection, detailed focus on a small number of cases, and data analysis as “explicit interpretation of the meanings and functions of human actions” (p. 248). In my study, I focused on exploring the nature of a phenomenon, literacies and learning in *SWH*, by studying members’ behavior as evidenced by their discussion board posts. I was attentive to the need to use a variety of research techniques to collect my data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Thus, I observed, wrote field notes, collected artifacts, and conducted virtual interviews within this ethnographic study.

Ethnography as a product demands that researchers define the situation (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). This is because ethnographies “re-create for the reader the shared beliefs, practices, artifacts, folk knowledge, and behaviors of some group of people” (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993, p. 2-3). Writing my account of *SWH* has been a challenging act of defining the space in a way that accurately presents the members’ “shared beliefs, practices...and behaviors” for readers who might not have first-hand knowledge of this culture. Though I do not claim to provide a perfect account of the literacies and learning in *SWH*, I strove to “[trace] the curve of social discourse; fixing it into an inspectable form” (Geertz, 1973, p. 19). Though my “tracing” of the social discourse is an incomplete portrayal of the phenomenon I studied, my two-year ethnographic study of *SWH* gave me insights to interpret the social discourse in a way that allows me to better re-create, or “trace,” it here for readers’ inspection. I caution readers to inspect my presentation of the data with the understanding that it represents how I came to make sense of *SWH*.

Virtual Ethnography

Qualitative inquiries involving online spaces have been labeled “connective ethnography” (Hine, 2000; Leander & McKim, 2003), “e-research” (Anderson & Kanuka, 2003), “Internet inquiry” (Markham & Baym, 2009), and “virtual ethnography” (Hine, 2000). I use the term virtual ethnography to position my study as part of a growing body of research using ethnographic methods to make sense of virtual environments (Baym, 2000; Black, 2008; Boellstorff, 2008; Bury, 2005; Fields & Kafai, 2009; Hine, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). Like Hine (2000), I view the “Internet as a culture where the uses people make of the technology available to them [is] studied” (p. 9). I sought to make sense of *SWH* by immersing myself in the space, “[using] that experience to try to learn how life is lived there” (Hine, 2009, p. 6). In defining the boundaries of

my field site, I drew on Leander and McKim's (2003) conceptualization of virtual ethnography as a "moving, traveling practice" (p. 237) and thus followed informants' *Sims* fan fiction-related activities wherever they led. I did this by clicking hyperlinks and reviewing the content informants hosted in online spaces other than *SWH*. As I explain later in this chapter, traveling my informants' networked hyperlinks was crucial to getting a full picture of their *Sims* fan fiction practices because *SWH* is interconnected with a variety of *Sims*-related web spaces.

Anderson and Kanuka (2003) argue that virtual ethnographies are most appropriate when the goal of the research is to study activity taking place online and when the Internet is the means for collecting data. The virtual aspect of my research project is a factor in both the research context, since a website was the site of the phenomenon under investigation, and in the data collection, because I used the Internet to collect data. The virtual connectivity afforded by the Internet made it possible for me to connect to informants with whom I would not otherwise have had access and to collect data I would not otherwise have collected.

Research Context

The Sims Writers' Hangout

SWH, a discussion forum website maintained and operated by its members, began as a small Yahoo!® Group of fans in 2005. The site quickly outgrew this platform as it became a popular fan site for *Sims*-related writing and moved to a ProBoards® site in 2006. At the time of my study, almost five years later, *SWH* had more than 12,000 members who had contributed more than 665,000 posts on more than 31,000 different topics organized into 22 forums and 72 sub-boards (May 12, 2010; See Appendix B for a list of *SWH* forums and their descriptions). To support members' production of *Sims* fan fiction, the forums include tips for overcoming writer's block, a classified section where

writers can solicit proofreaders and collaborators, links to *Sims* custom content available for download, and tutorials offering help with practices such as photo editing. The space also contained forums not directly related to *Sims* fan fiction, including a *Writers Lounge* for posting non-*Sims* poetry and prose, along with a *Chit Chat* forum.

SWH is not a repository for *Sims* fan fiction. Instead, members must upload their creations elsewhere and provide hyperlinks to those locations. Thus, *SWH* is a permeable space, interconnected with other web spaces housing *Sims* fan fiction, custom content, and *Sims* images. Figure 2 illustrates the connections between *SWH* and popular sites for hosting *Sims* fan fiction-related creations. These sites include official Electronic Arts-maintained sites, such as the *Exchange* (<http://thesims2.ea.com/exchange/>), which hosts content made with and for *The Sims 2*, and <http://www.thesims3.com/moviesandmore>, for content made with and for *The Sims 3*. Members also upload their creations to other fan-created sites such as *The Sims Resource*, member-created blogs and websites, and digital image and video sharing sites such as Flickr[®], YouTube, and Photobucket.

The connection between *SWH* and other websites also runs the other direction, with many outside sites containing members' references to and advertisements for *SWH*, encouraging other *The Sims* fans to join the space. I found examples of this two-way connection when reviewing my informants' *Sims* fan fiction practices. For example, Angela's website contains a hyperlink to *SWH*, Pamela's Flickr[®] page shows her membership in *The Sims Writers' Hangout* Flickr[®] group which connects back to *SWH*, and, in the last page of a *Sims* fan fiction uploaded to the *Exchange*, Missy mentions *SWH* when thanking a member for proof-reading her story.

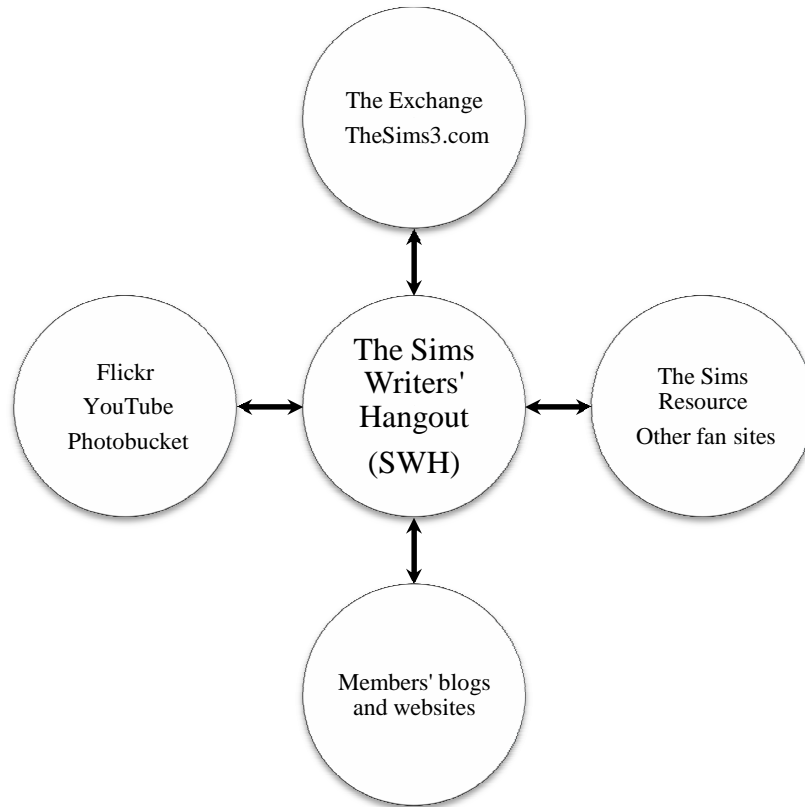


Figure 2. Sites connected to *SWH* for hosting *Sims*-related content. This graphic represents the interconnected relationship between *SWH* and the numerous other websites on which *The Sims* content and *Sims* fan fiction is hosted.

SWH's interconnectivity with these other websites had significant methodological implications. Had I confined my research site to only those interactions that take place on the *SWH* discussion board, I would have limited my understanding of what it means for members to participate in the space. To make sense of *SWH* as a culture, and to explore the full nature of the phenomenon, literacies and learning in *SWH*, required that I to spend hours following informants' hyperlinks to these other websites.

Members. On any given day, dozens of users log into *SWH*. According to the site's Info Center, the most users online at any one time was 196 people, back on November 15, 2006. Although specific demographic data regarding members was unavailable, I got a sense of who spent time in this space by reviewing member profiles.

Many members self-identified as adolescent females living in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe. Of the 100 members who had the most posts of all time (with 1,327 to 9,688 posts each as of February 28, 2010), only seven self-identified as males, and of those males, none were actively posting on *SWH* as of March 2010. The majority of posts came from a relatively small percentage of the membership, suggesting that many lurked in the space as silent observers. (See Figure 3 for more information on posting statistics).

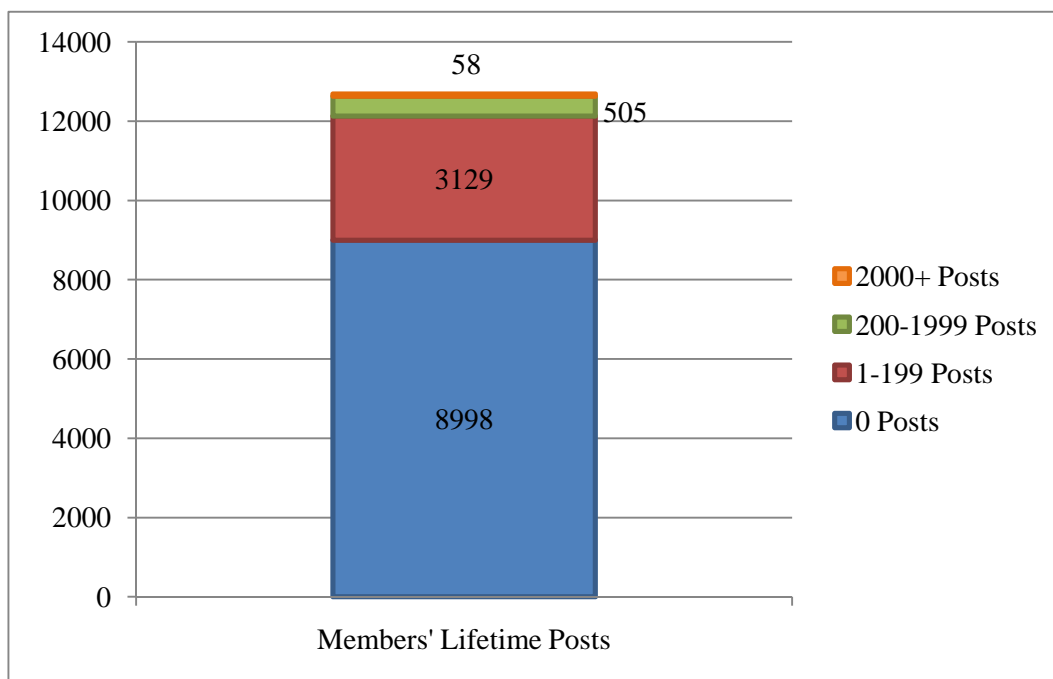


Figure 3. Posting statistics for *SWH* members. This bar graph includes all posts from the site's inception in 2005 through May 12, 2010.

Moderators. In keeping with the general demographics of the space, as of May 2010, all 15 of the *SWH* moderators were females (though there was one male moderator in the site's past). Moreover, for those whose profiles list the information, moderators ranged from 15 to 23 years of age. *SWH* promoted moderators from within, periodically soliciting applications from members interested in serving in a leadership capacity.

Moderators' discussion forum posts displayed their titles of Hangout Helper or Senior Staff, thus making their leadership role visible on every interaction in *SWH*.

Moderators serve within the space as idea-generators, contest managers, order-keepers, and teachers. As idea-generators, *SWH* moderators create and communicate new activities for the group and they played a central role in redesigning the forums during the summer of 2009. Moderators also manage site contests by developing rules, collecting submissions, and tallying votes to announce winners. Additionally, moderators are responsible for monitoring assigned forums to ensure that members post in the correct forum. In this order-keeper role, moderators sometimes move posts to the appropriate forum, warn members to stay on topic, or lock threads to stop an off-topic discussion. Finally, moderators serve as teachers within *SWH*, offering how-to instructions for participating in the space and by sharing their insights related to creating *Sims* fan fiction. I discuss the moderators' role as managers of *SWH* further in Chapter 3, and explore their role as teachers in Chapter 5.

Key Informants

I got to know my informants in several ways, by reviewing their *SWH* profiles, reading their *Sims* fan fictions and forum posts, collecting artifacts, and engaging them in semi-structured virtual interviews (see Appendix C for information on all key informants). In this section, I introduce the eight informants in my study: Angela, Eastwood, Eleanor, Eve, Missy, Naomi, Pamela, and Zahrah (all names are self-selected pseudonyms).

Angela. At the time of our interviews, Angela was a 15-year-old female, living in a rural area of the northeastern U.S. A freshman in high school, Angela's favorite school subjects were English and Science and she aspired to "teach English classes as well as become a famous author down the road" (personal communication, January 25,

2010). She joined *SWH* in August 2009; introducing herself by saying “I like to write stories, so I figured I’d join. I’m [Angela]” (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009).

Angela remembered first watching her older brothers play *The Sims* and then beginning to play herself when she was about 11 years old. She began going to *The Sims Resource (TSR)*, a popular fan site for custom content, with her mom to download content for her brothers. When she received her own copy of *The Sims*, she later returned to *TSR* “in hopes of creating prettier Sims with nicer clothes, skin, etc.” (Angela, personal communication, January 25, 2010). It was through *TSR* that she was introduced to creating *Sims* fan fiction. Asked what attracted her to the practice, Angela said she looked at the stories “just for their pretty covers at first, and then I finally decided to check one out. It happened to be one of my favorite stories...and it was actually the inspiration to create my own.” She posted her first *Sims* fan fiction, a fantasy story about a teenage boy’s struggle with his sexuality, to *TSR* on July 6, 2008.

In August 2009, Angela heard about *SWH* while reading *Sims* fan fiction posted on the *Exchange*. A member had included an entry advertising *SWH* in the middle of her story and Angela searched for the site and joined. Angela immediately created a thread for a story she was writing and began reading others’ fan fiction while she “waited for somebody to check out [hers]” (personal communication, February 9, 2010). Angela logged into *SWH* nearly every day to vent in the *Chit Chat* forum and follow the progress of fan fiction she enjoys. According to her, *SWH* was instrumental in her development as a writer because “members actually read the stories a lot more closely and try to give really good advice” (Angela, personal communication, February 20, 2010). Angela learned early on that “The Hangout was serious business” when the first fan fiction she posted on *SWH* garnered critical reader responses. She was encouraged to “maybe describe the settings, don’t rely on the pictures to tell us what the rooms look like” (*SWH*

post, August 10, 2009). She was also told, “In all honesty, I expected better from what I saw in the cover” (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009). As of March 1, 2010, she created threads for four different series on *SWH* and though she originally linked to creations she hosted on the *Exchange*, in December 2009, Angela created her own website on webs.com and now hosts her *Sims* fan fiction there. I checked in with Angela in January 2011 and she was continuing to participate in *SWH*, though she no longer wrote *Sims* fan fiction. At that time, she was posting stories in the *Writers Lounge*, a forum devoted to non-*Sims* writing.

Eastwood. Eastwood was a 19-year-old living in a “quiet” town in England. At the time of our interviews, she was not enrolled in school. She had been a first-year university student studying ancient history, but “didn’t enjoy” the subject so she was “interrupting [her] studies...[and planned on] returning in October to begin a new degree in film studies” (Eastwood, personal communication, March 19, 2010). She described parallels between her *Sims* fan fiction writing and coursework, saying:

Having to think so visually about scenes in *Echo* [her *Sims* fan fiction series], it definitely helped me in doing things like my coursework for film studies, where I had to produce a storyboard. Taking the photos in game you really have to think about the camera angle and what’s on view in the shot. (Eastwood, personal communication, March 21, 2010)

Eastwood started playing *The Sims* games as a 12-year-old, borrowing discs from friends at school to play different versions and expansion packs. She first became aware of *Sims* fan fiction by reading stories posted on the *Exchange*, and started writing her own at age fourteen. She called her first stories, “really, really bad ones...and always very predictable” (Eastwood, personal communication, March 19, 2010). She said that creating *Sims* fan fiction helped her develop as a writer because “telling a story with the aid of pictures is actually a great resource” (Eastwood, personal communication, March 21, 2010). According to Eastwood, “it’s actually really helpful to have that world almost

physically there for you, not just images plucked from your head but something you've built and can refer back to." Her series *Echo* was an eight-chapter supernatural romance that took her almost a year to complete. She called writing *Echo* a "really great experience...It felt good to actually finish something for once."

As with other members, Eastwood was drawn to *SWH* by advertisements in stories she read elsewhere. She joined in April 2006 because, "I thought maybe I could get some help from there (I really wanted to write a Sims story but I didn't understand how to do so)" (Eastwood, personal communication, March 19, 2010). Though she admits to being intimidated at first, worried because it "didn't seem like they had much time for a newbie like me," Eastwood did receive help when she began posting in the forums. She tapped into the space for help with character names, advice about the look of her characters, and assistance from proofreaders. Eastwood learned how to upload her stories to the *Exchange* without overwriting previous chapters and learned how to download custom content from tutorials posted in *SWH*. She also learned by taking up practices in the space, noting, "the competitions that they used to do really helped me step up my game in editing" (personal communication, April 21, 2010). Finally, she found "comments from people saying they can't wait for the next chapter...always spurred me on" (Eastwood, personal communication, March 26, 2010). *SWH* was one of many Sims fan sites Eastwood frequented, and not necessarily her favorite, because of its size. She said, "I much preferred joining the smaller sites as you got to know the members more and the atmosphere there was so much more welcoming" (Eastwood, personal communication, March 21, 2010). Eastwood had not posted in *SWH* since October 2009, but continues to create *Sims* fan fiction, as evidenced by a story she uploaded to the *Exchange* in December 2010.

Eleanor. At the time of our interviews, Eleanor was an 18-year-old college student in an urban Northern England town. Her gamer brothers first introduced her to *The Sims* video games when she was eleven, but eventually she and her mother were the primary players. Almost immediately, her game play included visiting fan sites, such as the *Exchange* and *Sims 2 Sisters*, and reading and writing stories with *Sims* characters. She noted, “I’d always liked writing stories, so when I read some on the *Exchange* I just saw it as a newer, fresh way to write stories” (Eleanor, personal communication, February 26, 2010).

Eleanor was an original member of *SWH*, having been a part of the space since it was a Yahoo!® Group in 2005. She was originally drawn to the group by members’ stories posted in the *Exchange* and she remained an active member for years. She noted, “On forums like the *Hangout* you meet a lot of new people, which is really what used to keep me motivated to go back on the site. Good comments for stories were very motivating too” (Eleanor, personal communication, February 26, 2010). During our interviews, Eleanor discussed how her participation in fan sites shaped her trajectory as a *Sims* fan fiction author. Early on, a *SWH* moderator told her to “write about what [you] know...all stories [have] to be grounded in reality” (Eleanor, personal communication, February 28, 2010). She also responded to the popularity of her *Sims* fan fiction, which were at one time the highest rated on the *Exchange* in the horror genre. She recalled, “I received lots of comments for them...so I decided I was best writing in that genre.”

Eleanor saw *Sims* fan fiction as a means for developing her skills as a writer. She said, “I’d view *Sims 2* story writing almost as being a writing exercise, and quite a fun one as you can pair it with the taking pictures and editing” (Eleanor, personal communication, February 28, 2010). Although Eleanor said that *The Sims* images made writing “fun,” her responses also revealed a tension regarding the multimodal nature of

Sims fan fiction. For example, she complained that the advice she received on *SWH* encouraging her to download “furniture for more interesting sets” or create a “better cover” or “more attractive” photos “didn’t relate to actual story writing...They were the most annoying types of advice, because I was never so concerned with the photo side of *Sims* stories.” Later, Eleanor reiterated this frustration when she said, “I understand that the pictures are a big part, but it’s still a story – that should always be more important, in my opinion, the quality of the writing” (personal communication, May 8, 2010).

At the peak of her engagement in *Sims*-related fan sites, Eleanor spent hours each night in these spaces. On *SWH*, she contributed more than 5600 posts, earning her the rank of Demi God/Goddess on her profile. However, she no longer spends as much time playing the games or writing *Sims* fan fiction: “Unfortunately other things have become more important in my life, giving me less time to go on *The Sims*” (Eleanor, personal communication, February 26, 2010). Eleanor last logged in to *SWH* on October 25, 2010, but had not posted in any of the forums since August 2008.

Eve. Eve was a 22-year-old high school graduate living in Hawaii at the time of our interviews. She was working part-time at an elementary school after-care program and had hopes of attending film school “to learn the ways of becoming a film director” (Eve, personal communication, March 6, 2010). In high school, Eve was always “obsessed” with creative subjects, like Art, Music, and Theater, and disliked Math and English, though she called it “ironic” because English would be her favorite subject if she were in school now. When asked to explain this statement, Eve revealed that she “had a serious problem with dyslexia [that made her] feel slow and unwise whenever [she] read or wrote things for school” (personal communication, March 15, 2010). According to her, *Sims* activities helped her “overcome [dyslexia] and become more comfortable and confident with reading and writing.”

She began playing *The Sims* when the series first came on the market and was initially drawn to the game by her interest in architecture and interior design. Eve enjoyed the fact that she “could create a decorated house and see it right in front of [her] eyes so quickly – it was a thousand times better than legos [*sic*]” (personal communication, March 6, 2010). With the release of *The Sims 2*, she began exploring fan sites and downloading custom content into her game. Though she had been reading stories posted on the *Exchange* for some time, Eve did not begin writing her own Sims fan fiction until after her high school graduation in 2005, when she “had time on [her] hands.” Her earliest creations were “romantic comedy stories about unpopular girls that grew up to be very inspiring and confident people” or adaptations of Japanese manga she enjoyed.

Eve enjoyed the work of a favorite Sims author so much that she followed her to *SWH* and joined in October 2005, at a time when there were approximately a hundred members and “it was much easier to make friends” (personal communication, March 15, 2010). Early on, Eve focused her *SWH* participation on developing friendships by posting in general, non-Sims sections of the forum. Later, she became more active in the *Sims* fan fiction aspects of the space, participating in contests, creating photo-editing tutorials, and making story covers for members who asked for her assistance. Eve authored a popular seven chapter *Sims* fan fiction series, *To Be, or Not to Be...in Love*, a story that combined her interests in romance, theater, and strong female characters. She also began, but did not finish, a story she created as a web-hosted *Sims* graphic novel. Readers called this project “pure genius” (*SWH* post, April 17, 2007) and told her, “I love the whole comic book idea – this is really inspiring to me” (*SWH* post, April 21, 2007). This and other positive feedback she received from readers bolstered Eve. She said, “I’ve

inspired so many others into doing what I find [is] such a great experience in expressing their creativity through storytelling” (Eve, personal communication, March 15, 2010).

Eve’s use of *The Sims* as a tool for creative expression evolved over time to include filming *The Sims 2* movies, including a music video she created to accompany her *To Be, or Not to Be...In Love* series. She also did a voice-acting project for another’s *Sims* machinima. Eve had a blog, a website, a YouTube channel, a Flickr® photostream, and a Twitter feed devoted to publishing and publicizing her work. She also had hopes of one day turning her *Sims* fan fiction series into novels. Eve said, “I’m rather surprised at how *The Sims* has given me so many different hobbies, yet when I first started playing all I thought I’d get was something to help me escape the real world” (personal communication, March 15, 2010). Though she no longer posted in *SWH*, she did continue to publish *Sims* creations online, including a Katy Perry music video remake created in *The Sims 2* that she posted on YouTube in November 2010.

Missy. Missy was a 23-year-old university graduate living in London at the time of our interviews. In addition to her work as a “pharmaceutical specials technician,” she spent 10-20 hours per week on *Sims*-related activities, including playing *The Sims 3*, creating *Sims* fan fiction, and participating on *SWH*. Of *The Sims* she said, “its [*sic*] my only creative output and what I do for fun” (Missy, personal communication, April 14, 2010).

Missy started playing *The Sims* at age 16 when a male friend of hers who “hated” the game gave it to her “rather than throwing it out” (personal communication, April 14, 2010). She described the first *Sims* fan fiction she read as “an enchanting tale” that inspired her to start writing. Missy enjoyed reading “drama/sci-fi/mystery/fantasy” genres, and those were the first types of stories she created in *The Sims 2*. The only story she shared on *SWH* was titled *Baby Blue*, a *Sims* fan fiction series about a “typical

suburban couple...[whose] lives are plunged into chaos” (*SWH* post, June 11, 2006) when they give birth to a blue, partially alien, baby. Missy wove her knowledge of biology and genetics into this suspenseful, science-fiction narrative.

She discovered *Sims* fan sites when *The Sims 2* came out and she “managed to log on to the official *Sims 2* website.” From there, she became aware of other fan websites and joined *SWH* in February 2006. Missy especially enjoyed participating in and moderating *SWH* modeling contests, including The Hangout’s Next Top Model. She provided feedback on stories she read and served as a resource in the space, answering member questions about *The Sims* games and providing tips about how to create engaging *Sims* fan fiction. She said she was motivated to participate in the space because “its [*sic*] also nice when people appreciate the things you produce, it encourages you to do more” (Missy, personal communication, April 14, 2010). After serving as a Hangout Helper for a while, in July 2009, Missy was promoted to Senior Staff, working with Pamela to manage *SWH*. Together they “revamped” *SWH* in the fall of 2009 (see Chapter 3 for more discussion on the revamp) and Missy remained an active moderator until June 2010. At that time, she went on holiday to Miami and was absent from the site for more than five months. On January 3, 2011, she posted an explanation for her absence titled, “MIA & Happy New Year” in which she described getting into a tragic car accident that killed the driver, put her into a coma, and prevented her from returning to London for months. She had moved back home before Christmas and was only just beginning to walk again and reconnect to the Internet when she posted this message.

Naomi. Naomi was an 18-year-old college freshman living in the United States, majoring in pre-optometry and anthropology. Her brother gave her a copy of *The Sims* when she was in fourth grade and she had played games in the series, “off and on” (Naomi, personal communication, January 25, 2010) since that time. She did not

consider herself much of a gamer, and said she was “not tech-savvy enough to do the custom content thing.” Rather, she was much more attracted to the story-telling aspects of *The Sims*. Naomi said she was an avid reader, and most of her story ideas came from books she read or movies she saw. Though she had always “created stories in [her] head as [she] played,” she did not start writing *Sims* fan fiction until 2008. According to her, “Any time I’m on *The Sims*, I’m working on a story. Even if I don’t share it.”

Naomi first joined *SWH* back in May 2008. However, like her game play, Naomi’s participation in the space was “off and on.” During her senior year in high school, she took a “long break” from creative writing and only returned to regularly logging into *SWH* in early 2010. She said of her *Sims*-related activities: “It’s not like this is a huge part of my real life. It’s just a fun, interesting (and secret) supplement” (Naomi, personal communication, April 15, 2010). Though not an active sharer of *Sims* fan fiction, she did post a variety of non-*Sims* creative writing in the *Writers Lounge* forum of *SWH* beginning in 2010. She called story writing “a lot of fun” and saw *SWH* as a supportive community, saying it was “a nice change from, for example, high school honors English teachers that stamp on your self-esteem and burry [*sic*] it in the dirt.”

When she described her *SWH* participation, Naomi said, “I have always mostly come for strictly *Sims 2* related business. But, lately it’s been fun to participate in the [*Chit Chat*] boards” (personal communication, April 15, 2010). She spent a great deal of time looking at the custom content links and the edited *Sims* photos, because she “[loved] the art of it all.” She also enjoyed having “the chance to read the work of people [her] age” (Naomi, personal communication, January 25, 2010). Naomi “[loved] to proofread” *Sims* fan fiction and she felt it was important to comment on others’ work. She said, “I try to give feedback as much as possible, whether it’s on ideas or posted stories. I think everyone on [*SWH*] has a unique and beautiful way of writing. ...Constructive criticism,

feedback, and praise are all important” (Naomi, personal communication, April 15, 2010). At the time of our interviews, she was reaching out to members for help learning how to use GIMP, a photo-editing software. She had previously called on others in the space to help her create covers and signature images to advertise her stories. Naomi appreciated *SWH* for being a space in which people were “willing to help if you ask.” While Naomi continued to log in to *SWH* at the time of my check in January 2011, she had not posted in the space since September 27, 2010.

Pamela. When I first began exchanging messages with her, Pamela was an 18-year-old, Canadian high school senior, and the lead moderator of *SWH*. Between her AP classes, college applications, and her duties as Senior Staff on *SWH*, which included the launch of a popular contest The Hangout’s Next Top Model, Season 4, Pamela said she did not have time to respond to the interview protocol. However, she was willing to provide some insight into what it meant to be a moderator in *SWH* and gave me consent to collect her *SWH* posts as data.

During the course of my initial observation phase, I watched Pamela’s rise to power. She joined *SWH* in May 2007 and held various leadership roles since early 2008 when she first became a Hangout Helper, which meant that she moderated a few of the forums. At the beginning of her junior year in high school, Pamela posted that her Internet time had been restricted to “1 hour a day on the weekends” (*SWH* post, September 2, 2008) so she could focus on her studies. Later that year, she posted a message in the Holiday/Leaving the Hangout thread that said, in part:

I’m finding [*SWH*] to be flooded by this random mass of people who seem less than interested in writing, or *The Sims* for that matter. All I’m seeing are these little popularity contests where people are more interested in what you look like and how c001 you are...I’m not leaving, but I’m going to have to try to find another muse to stay, other than my story and obligations. (*SWH* post, December 21, 2008)

Her “muse to stay” came when she was asked if she would consider becoming Senior Staff. She explained how it happened this way: “I was really the only active Hangout Helper left...Because of my leadership, Jen [pseudonym] (old staff) entrusted me with Senior Staff and took her leave” (Pamela, personal communication, February 19, 2010). Pamela became the head moderator in June 2009 and announced, “As I’m sure you’re all aware of, the *Hangout*’s kind of been like America’s economy after the reign of Bush...I’ve recently been appointed to staff, and I hope and hope and PRAY that I can revive this place. Call me Obama” (*SWH* post, June 3, 2009). Within a month of her appointment, Pamela promoted Missy to a Senior Staff position and 13 others to Hangout Helpers. She was instrumental in a “revamp” of the site that took place that fall (See Chapter 3 for more discussion of the *SWH* revamp).

In addition to her participation as *SWH* leadership, Pamela was more active as a *Sims* fan fiction reader than she was as a writer. In October 2008, she shared an idea for a story in a *The Sims 2 Coming Soon* thread. She advertised *Chopsticks* as a story providing insight into the life of a teenager in Osaka, Japan. In the initial post, Pamela shared a plot summary, four character sketches with photos, and said, “This story doesn’t really have a tight, specific plot. It’s not about superheroes, vampires, crazy people, or super-diseases” (*SWH* post, October 27, 2008). Though she occasionally updated the thread about her progress, and created a Flickr® set to host its images, the story was never completed and on June 12, 2009, Pamela posted that *Chopsticks* was not coming soon because “some how [her] game got completely uninstalled, deleted, everything” (*SWH* post). This was the only venture into writing *Sims* fan fiction Pamela shared on *SWH* or the *Exchange*. As of January 2011, Pamela was the only Senior Staff moderator in *SWH*, and though she had intermittent Internet access in her college dorm, she continued to log into the site and moderate as often as possible.

Zahrah. Zahrah was a 22-year-old college student living in an urban area of the eastern United States at the time of our interviews. She had yet to declare a major, but was “interested in psychology” (Zahrah, personal communication, January 25, 2010).

She began playing *The Sims* at age 13, when the first game was released. Once *The Sims 2* was released, Zahrah became interested in downloading content into her game. Exploring the custom content available on various fan sites initially made her “jealous” of the quality of others’ Sims, so she began making content of her own (Zahrah, personal communication, January 25, 2010). Zahrah created a set of Sims eyes, clothing, and Sims models that she made available to other players via her custom content websites and on deviantART and Flickr[®]. She learned to use Adobe[®] Photoshop[®] and GIMP to edit photos and create *Sims* content, sometimes using online tutorials and YouTube videos for assistance. Though she had some success with creating custom content, she had trouble creating jeans and shoes, and she did not even want to attempt to make her own Sims hair, “because meshing is just too hard” (Zahrah, personal communication, January 27, 2010).

For Zahrah, creating *Sims* fan fiction started when she was “fooling around with the camera and took a ton of pictures” (personal communication, January 25, 2010). She used these pictures to create a story that was a diary of her Sim, “showing pictures of what happened in her life.” Though she had attempted other creative *Sims* fan fiction at one time or another, Zahrah explained, “I don’t write too often actually because I can’t ever finish the story” (personal communication, January 30, 2010). She later elaborated that creating *Sims* fan fiction was too time-consuming, saying, “If I wanted to spend hours writing I would write a novel not a *Sims 2* story” (Zahrah, personal communication, April 14, 2010).

Zahrah joined *SWH* in December 2007. Like many of my other informants, she “first discovered the *Hangout* from reading a story on the [*Exchange*]” (Zahrah, personal communication, January 30, 2010). Zahrah was a consistently active member of *SWH* over the years because she “liked the stories and it’s a friendly place.” She channeled her interest in creating Sims models and custom content into her participation on *SWH*. For example, she ran a photo editing and narrative contest about Sims couples called The Big Day. Zahrah also offered help to other *Sims* fan fiction writers by creating story covers and answering questions in the *Where Can I Find?* sub-board. When asked why such activities were so much a part of her *SWH* participation, Zahrah explained, “I sometimes do a request out of boredom actually. Plus I have read the series and thought why not contribute in some way. Also I remember being there and requesting before I learned how to Photoshop” (personal communication, February 3, 2010). At the time of this writing, Zahrah continued to be active in *SWH*, though most of her posts shared stories of her personal and relationship struggles in the *Chit Chat* forum.

My Role as the Researcher

I came to my study of *SWH* as an outsider trying to make sense of the space and its practices with the help of insiders, in much the same manner as other ethnographic research of unfamiliar cultures. When I began collecting data in *SWH*, I had played *The Sims 2* for months and had created *Sims* fan fiction capturing the daily interactions of a Sims family, which I uploaded to the *Exchange*. I was a nonparticipant observer (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) in *SWH*. I made my position as a university researcher as clear as possible on my profile through my user name (drjayne2b), university email address, and link to the project website (see Figure 4 for a screenshot of my member profile). I sought to conduct my research in a non-manipulative (Eisner, 1991) manner aiming not to influence the practices of the space, so I did not post publicly in the forums.

Rather, all of my interactions with study informants in *SWH* occurred through private message (PM).

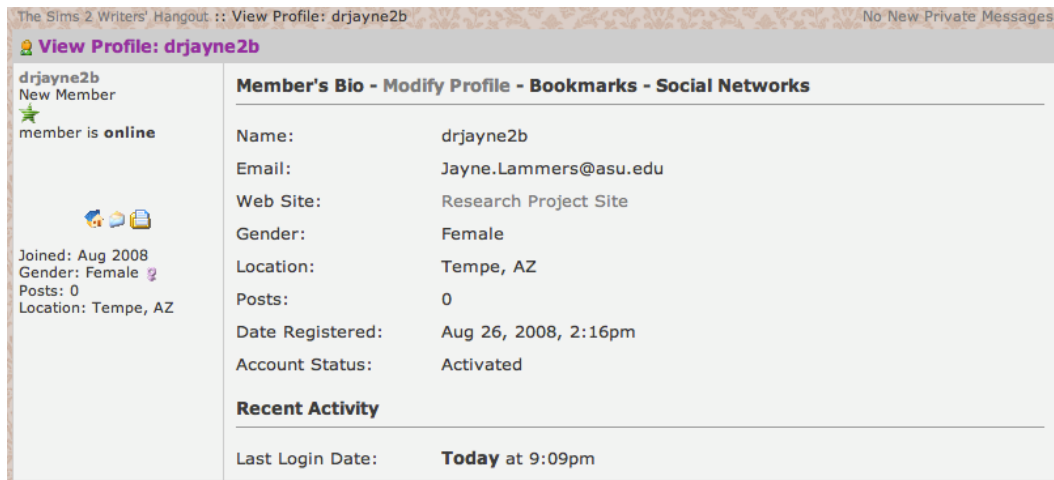


Figure 4. Screenshot of my *SWH* member profile. I share this image of my *SWH* profile as evidence of my effort to be a transparent researcher in this space. Also, note my post count is zero.

Procedures

In this section, I elucidate the data collection method used for this study, discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008), and explain my systematic observation of *SWH* and interactions with key informants. I finish by describing the data sources derived from this process, which included discussion forum posts, member profiles, moderator-created norming texts, *Sims* fan fiction texts, virtual interviews, field notes, and additional artifacts.

Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography

I collected data over a two-year period, spending hours online in *SWH* and connected websites each week. I followed discourse-centered online ethnography procedures (Androutsopoulos, 2008) as I examined the relationships among members of *SWH* and took note of the various processes involved in creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in this space. I delineate Androutsopoulos' "practice-derived guidelines" (p. 6) in

Table 2. These guidelines provided a framework that supported my systematic observation of the space and my contact with key informants.

Table 2

Practice-derived Guidelines for Discourse-Centered Online Ethnography

Practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation:

- 1) Examine relationships and processes rather than isolated artifacts
 - 2) Move from core to periphery of a field
 - 3) Repeat observation
 - 4) Maintain openness
 - 5) Use all available technology
 - 6) Use observation insights as guidance for further sampling
-

Practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors:

- 1) Contacts should be limited, non-random, and include various participation formats
 - 2) Pay attention to the initial contact
 - 3) Formulate and customize interview guidelines
 - 4) Confront participants with (their own) material
 - 5) See repeated and prolonged contacts
 - 6) Make use of alternative techniques whenever possible
-

Note. Table from Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6

Systematic observation. I began by going into every forum in *SWH*, reading the rules posted by moderators and a few of the posts within each forum. This gave me an initial sense of the norms intended to govern interactions and an idea of the literacy practices within and throughout the space. I then engaged in repeated observations of the most active areas of *SWH*, such as *Chit Chat* and popular *Sims* fan fiction story threads in *The Sims 2 Bookshop*, as well as those with little to no activity. I read discussion forum posts by the most prolific members and the moderators, and by some of the newest and

less active members, thus moving from the “core to the periphery” (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6) of *SWH*.

During these observations, I read and downloaded discussion forum posts and followed hyperlinks to the *Sims* fan fiction and other artifacts to which they pointed. I collected virtual artifacts by capturing them through screenshots and copying the web addresses for future reference. I navigated *SWH* by following internal links, looked at posting statistics to assess member activity, and employed the site’s search features to find all the posts by an individual, thus using “all available technology” (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 6) to gather data. I recorded my observations, interpretations, wonderings, and proposed next steps, in field notes. Throughout this phase, my systematic observation was more than simply gazing at the artifacts on the site, but rather an attempt to get a feel for *SWH* as a culture as I focused on the “relationships and processes” (p. 6) involved in creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in *SWH*. This initial phase of data collection lasted 12 months.

Contact with key informants. Using insights gained from my repeated observation of the space, I identified potential key informants. I selected informants whose interactions spanned different types of participation in *SWH*, including moderators, longtime members, authors of popular *Sims* fan fiction, prolific posters, and new members. I followed Androutsopoulos’ “practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors” (2008, p. 6) and contacted these members through the private message (PM) system on *SWH*. I wrote my initial contact message in a way that positioned me as a researcher, explained my project, and “indicated my familiarity with the field” (p. 8). As Androutsopoulos did in his research, I attempted to strike a balance between informality and professional distance in this initial contact (See Figure 5 for the initial contact message I sent to Pamela). If a member agreed to participate, I directed her

to a Google site that contained the project's informational letter and asked her to enter her email address and birth date, so I could determine whether or not parental permission was required. If the informant was under 18-years-old, and parental permission was required, I sent her the required permission form via email. Once I received the completed form back from the potential informant, I contacted her parent on the telephone, explained my project and the child's role as an informant, and verified parental permission over the phone. These procedures were approved by Arizona State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) as a means of adequately protecting the rights of my study informants (See Appendix D for the IRB-approved letters and forms used to secure consent and assent).

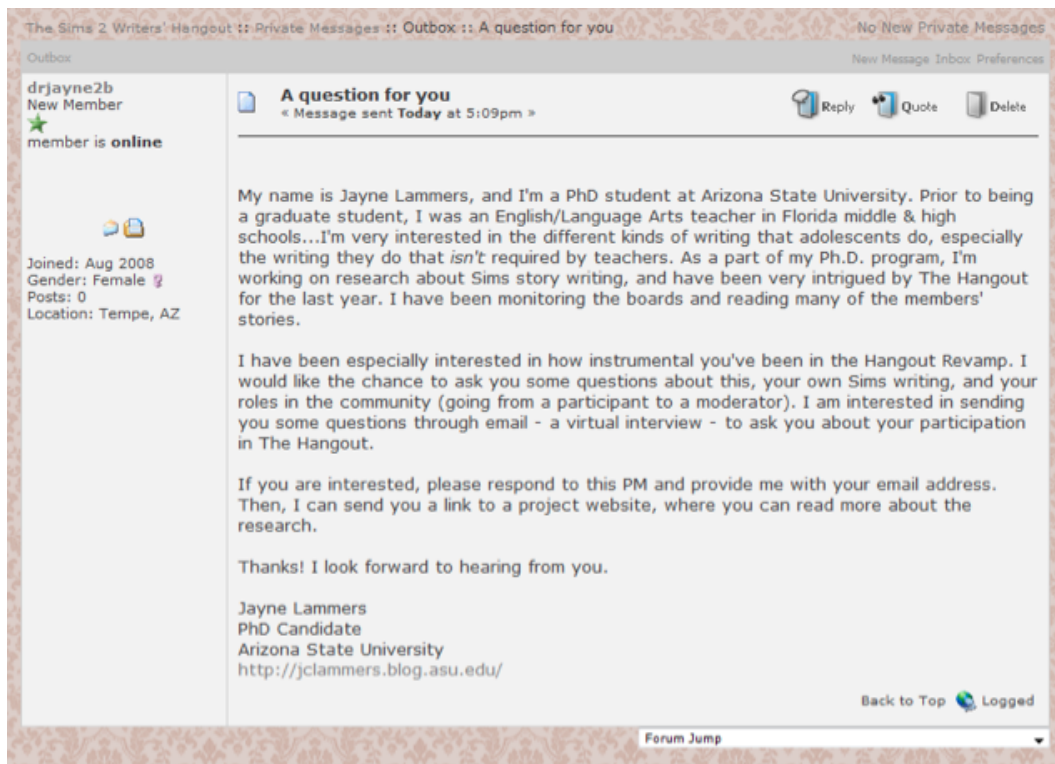


Figure 5. Screenshot of initial contact with Pamela. I sent this message on December 6, 2009. I altered the image to remove Pamela's user name from the greeting.

Eight young women agreed to share their thoughts with me. To get these insiders' perspectives, I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews, through email or PM. I began with an interview protocol developed for another study of *The Sims 2* custom content creators (Hayes, King, & Lammers, 2008) and adapted it to correspond to my understanding of *SWH* (See Appendix E for the interview protocol). In preparing to virtually interview each of the young women, I customized the interview questions to reflect my observations of each informant's interactions within *SWH*. I also "confront[ed] members with excerpts from their own [work]" (Androutsopoulos, 2008, p. 8). For example, I asked them to speak to the choices they made when creating *Sims* fan fiction by pointing to examples in those texts and questioning them. I also shared quotes from discussion forum posts in their story threads on *SWH* and asked for their reactions to feedback they received in the space. I maintained "repeated and prolonged" (p. 8) contact with most of my informants throughout the next 12 months of continued data collection and analysis, as they continued to confirm and inform my understanding of practices in *SWH*.

Data Sources

The complete data corpus for my study of *SWH* includes hundreds of pages of downloaded forum posts, member profiles, moderator-created norming texts, numerous digital and multimodal *Sims* fan fiction texts, informant virtual interview responses, field notes capturing my observations, and artifacts collected, including tutorials and other *Sims* fan fiction-related resources. Below, I describe each of these sources and the ways I collected them.


Discussion forum posts. Participation in *SWH* takes the form of posting messages in the forums. As noted earlier, *SWH* contained more than 665,000 posts (as of May 12, 2010) in a variety of different sub-forums. Conducting my research in *SWH*

meant that I read and downloaded hundreds of pages of these posts, saving them in Microsoft® Word documents. I read posts in *Sims* fan fiction threads, in which the authors and readers interacted. I read posts in *Chit Chat* forums, which helped me understand the importance of “hanging out” in this space (see Chapter 3). I followed my informants’ participation in *SWH* by reading some, as in the case of those with thousands of posts, or all of their discussion forum posts.

Member profiles. I reviewed members’ *SWH* profiles and captured screenshots of my informants’ profiles to include in the data corpus. These profiles were a source of information about each informant and her participation in *SWH*.

When they join *SWH*, members create a profile in which they include a screen name, their gender, and age. Members may also choose to add an avatar image, their location, birth date, and contact information including email address, website, and instant messengers. To indicate the member's activity level in the space, the profile displays the number of posts, stars, and membership rank earned for that level of posting. For those members who serve as moderators, the membership rank is replaced by either Senior Staff or Hangout Helper. Members can choose to include a signature, which will also appear at the bottom of their discussion forum posts. Signatures can be multimodal and contain hyperlinks to the user’s *Sims* fan fiction story thread in *SWH* and/or outside website hosting *Sims* creations. Figure 6 is a sample profile for Pamela, one of my moderator informants.

Senior Staff
★★★★★★
member is offline



liebe,

Joined: May 2007
Gender: Female
Posts: 3,607
Location: Never never land.

Member's Bio - Send Personal Message

Name: _____
 Email: *hidden*
 Birthday: 12/27/1991
 Age: 19
 Gender: Female
 Location: Never never land.
 Posts: 3,607
 Date Registered: May 11, 2007, 2:19pm
 Account Status: Activated


Recent Activity

Last Login Date: Yesterday at 10:22pm

Recent Posts: View most recent posts.

Re: [FORUM] Shredding Board Yesterday at 12:07pm
 Re: MIA & Happy New Year on Jan 3, 2011, 10:58pm
 Re: [Photoshoot Finale] The One Who Stole It All on Dec 18, 2010, 4:30pm
 [Photoshoot Finale] The One Who Stole It All on Dec 12, 2010, 11:24pm
 Re: [Photoshoot 8] Gods and Goddesses on Dec 12, 2010, 2:23pm

Signature



It's history. It's poetry.
It's a beautiful reciprocal.

Figure 6. Screenshot of Pamela's member profile. This image was captured on January 8, 2011. I altered it to remove references to her user name and real name.

Moderator-created norming texts. Moderators attempt to set the norms for participation in *SWH* in part by creating discussion posts containing rules for what should or should not get posted in each sub-forum. I coined the term *moderator-created norming texts* to refer to this feature in *SWH*. They are a type of discussion forum post, and are pinned to the top of most sub-forums. As members continue to post in a forum, these norming texts remain prominently displayed at the top of the screen. Moderator-created norming texts have titles such as “RULES & TIPS – Read before posting” and “What’s This?” These titles are intended to draw members’ attention to the directions

before they post in a forum. During the course of the study, I collected 59 moderator-created norming texts.

Sims fan fiction texts. *Sims* fan fiction texts are multimodal, hybrid stories created by pairing digital images taken in *The Sims* with text the author writes. Members of *SWH* host their *Sims* fan fiction on the *Exchange*, in blogs, and on personal websites. To collect these texts as data, I captured screenshots from websites and downloaded texts into Microsoft® Word documents. I also kept hyperlinks for each of these texts so that I could return to the websites and view them as the authors originally intended.

Virtual interviews. Informants' interview responses were vital data in helping me to gain insiders' perspectives into what I observed in *SWH*. As noted earlier, I conducted interviews virtually, using email or *SWH*'s PM system. The interview protocol contained 40 questions, which I personalized for each informant and then divided into two or three separate messages. Informants' virtual interview responses were stored as Microsoft® Word documents. As my data collection and analysis continued and I became more familiar with the practices in *SWH*, I found I had additional questions for my informants. For example, during the analysis for Chapter 3, I wanted to know more about fangirl comments, so I sent follow-up questions asking for participants' perspectives about these comments. The iterative nature of my virtual interviews allowed me to continue to make sense of *SWH* from the insiders' points of view.

Field notes. To document my systematic observation of *SWH*, I created multimodal field notes in Microsoft® Word. I captured screenshots, text from discussion board posts, hyperlinks to *Sims* fan fiction and other artifacts, and recorded my own interpretations and wonderings in these documents. I also wrote notes about areas of *SWH* that I wanted to explore next. These field notes helped me to track both my observations and my thoughts about what I was seeing in the space.

Additional artifacts. In addition to the data sources mentioned, my study of *SWH* involved collecting other artifacts, such as *The Sims 2* movies made by Eve and the custom content made by Zahrah. These artifacts were hosted on a variety of websites linked to *SWH* through discussion board posts. To collect these data, I captured screenshots and noted web addresses so that I could return to the artifacts later.

Together, these data sources documented my two-year virtual ethnography of *SWH*. In each of the three chapters that follow, I describe how various data were analyzed to answer my research questions.

CHAPTER 3

“IS THE HANGOUT...THE HANGOUT?” EXPLORING TENSIONS IN AN ONLINE GAMING-RELATED FAN SITE²

...whether or not the *Hangout* is serving its purpose can be debatable. It is *The Sims Writer's Hangout*, but we can't very well push an interest in writing if the interest isn't there can we? ...If the writing aspect of this forum has been minimized it is only because the members have allowed this to become so. No amount of administrators can force a group of over 10,000 to have an enthusiasm for writing. (emphasis in original; from *SWH*³ post “Is the Hangout...The Hangout?” December 31, 2008)

Much of the literature available for online fan spaces depicts them as relatively harmonious, cohesive communities formed around members' shared interests. Research of these spaces began with Jenkins' work to make sense of activist fan sites that united around unsanctioned appropriations of media texts (Jenkins, 1992; 2006a; 2006b). Studies such as these continue to offer insight into the ways interpersonal relationships develop in these spaces (Baym, 2000) and the affordances that make these sites dynamic learning environments (Black, 2008; Gee, 2004). However, little attention is paid to understanding the tensions that occur within these spaces, and how those tensions shape and are shaped by interactions within the sites. Take, for example, the above quote from a thread on *The Sims Writers' Hangout* (*SWH*; <http://similik.proboards.com/>), a *Sims* fan website developed to support members' *Sims* fan fiction writing pursuits. Here we see a glimpse into the kind of tensions that can arise as online fan groups evolve and as members' interests diverge.

² A chapter to appear in the forthcoming *New Literacies in Videogame Affinity Spaces*, S.C. Duncan & E.R. Hayes (Eds.), New York: Peter Lang.

³ As a consideration for the privacy of all *SWH* members, especially those who were not participants in this study and many of whom are minors, I do not include any identifying information when quoting their discussion board posts.

In this chapter, I focus on such tensions to explore how lack of a shared purpose has affected, and continues to affect, this online gaming-related fan site. I also pose a larger question regarding the necessity of a (single) shared purpose and if it needs to be made explicit and remain consistent within online fan sites. To pursue these questions, I examined forum threads in which members of *SWH* discuss happenings and observed their practices around creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. Using Gee's (2004) theory of affinity spaces as a framework for making sense of this site, my analysis of the *SWH* forum adds to our understanding of the complex nature of online fan spaces. The analysis presented here is part of a larger study to explore literacies and learning in an online fan community (Lammers, 2011b). I continue this introduction by reviewing the relevant online fan community literature and conclude with a description of *Sims* fan fiction.

What We Know about Online Fan Communities

Researchers offer various labels to describe and theorize the online places where people gather around shared interests, including knowledge cultures (Lévy, 1997), virtual communities (Rheingold, 2000), participatory cultures (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Weigel, & Robison, 2006), and networked publics (Ito, et al., 2010). These spaces exist around numerous interests, such as health issues, politics, and media fandom. In blogs, discussion boards, newsgroups, media sharing sites, and other websites, fans meet to share in their fandom of television shows, movies, books, anime and manga⁴ series, video games, etc. As these online fan spaces become more prevalent, researchers in communications (Baym, 2000; 2007; Watson, 1997), media studies (Jenkins, 1992;

⁴ Anime is a Japanese style cartoon or animated movie and manga is a Japanese style of graphic novel or comics.

2006a; 2006b; Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Weigel, & Robison, 2006), and education (Black, 2008; Foerst, 2008; Gee, 2004; Tobin, 1999) seek to make sense of them.

Online fan spaces can be sites where people develop meaningful friendships with other fans, whom they may never meet face-to-face. In her study of a Usenet newsgroup of soap opera fans, Baym (2000) described how strangers became friends as they exchanged messages analyzing and commenting on the episodes and characters in their favorite daytime soaps. In posting their messages about the soap operas, the group exhibited an “ethic of friendliness” (p. 121) constructed through various social norms developed within the group. This friendship extended beyond their fandom as participants exchanged messages of congratulations on weddings and births, as well as messages of support during personal tragedies. Tobin (1999) also addressed the notion of friendship in his exploration of what constitutes a “real” friend as his son, Isaac, interacted online with other fans of *Warhammer 40,000*. From the 15-year-old’s perspective, his fellow *Warhammer 40,000* fans were friends, whereas his parents expressed concerns about whether or not online interactions could serve to develop meaningful friendships. Isaac saw no need to meet face-to-face or to know personal information about these people to cultivate friendships: “Those things have nothing to do with our conversations. I know the people I write to from what they write to me and the list. That’s all that matters to me” (p. 122).

In addition to facilitating friendships, online groups can function as collaborative learning environments. Black (2007) offered an analysis contrasting learning in an online fan space with classroom learning, noting that on FanFiction.net, fans have opportunities to take on “meaningful social roles and to shape the content and interactional organization of the space” (p. 393) – opportunities not typically available to students in classrooms. Watson (1997) pointed to both the “wealth of prepared information” (p. 105)

and the diverse knowledge of the group as resources for those who come to online groups for answers to questions related to their fandom.

To supplement the research centering on single, bounded online spaces where fans gather, others note that fan spaces can consist of numerous interconnected websites, discussion boards, and listservs. Baym (2007) offered an analysis of Swedish Indie music fandom describing fan participation as occurring through a distributed, “quasi-coherent” network of sites, rather than in the centralized online groups of the past. Similarly, Tobin (1999) described his son’s participation in *Warhammer 40,000* fandom as occurring through a variety of e-mail lists, as well as through creating and engaging on other related websites.

Much of the available research highlights ways in which well-functioning online sites (or networks) support participants by providing engaging sites for friendly interaction, learning, and collaboration. Examples of moments of tension and conflict in online fan groups are mentioned only rarely in the research. One example is in an analysis of Phish.net, an online discussion group of 50,000 fans of the band Phish; Watson (1997) discussed strategies participants employed to deal with the loss of intimacy that comes with increased population of the group. As the group grew larger, Phish.netters developed “tools for the maintenance of intimacy, behavioral norms, and values” (p. 116). Other references to disharmony in online fan sites often center on the practice of ‘flaming,’ or yelling at someone through a post. Watson explained, participants often become aware of the shared norms of an online group through “the inevitable first ‘flame’ or personal message from a more experienced member who attempts to inform the user of where they crossed the line of acceptability for that group” (p. 111). More often, references to flaming in the literature offer illustrations of how

online fan groups create a culture that discourages flaming (Baym, 2000; Black, 2005; Bury, 2005).

My analysis of *SWH* expands this line of research by exploring an online group in the midst of transition. By shedding light on moments of tension in *SWH*, this chapter problematizes assumptions of online fan communities as friendly, collaborative spaces. I explore ways to make sense of an online fan space experiencing conflict by analyzing how these conflicts are worked out and how participants negotiate varied purposes within the space.

Defining Sims Fan Fiction

The Sims series of video games is a life simulation game in which players create families, design homes, build communities, and interact in an open-ended platform. The game appeals to a diverse population of players and has sold more than 125 million copies worldwide (EA Play Label, 2010). The franchise remains successful, in part, because players can make the experience their own by downloading custom content, such as clothing, hairstyles, and home furnishings, into their game. To support this practice, a vast network of online fan sites exist where players interact to discuss the game, upload and download content, engage in challenges, swap cheat codes, and much more. Electronic Arts (EA) game designers have drawn from this network to incorporate fans' ideas and practices into new releases of and expansion packs for *The Sims*.

One such practice that caused EA to take notice was the way fans documented their Sims'⁵ lives. The original game design of *The Sims* did not have a built-in functionality for taking pictures while playing the game. However, fans were taking screen captures of their Sims as they engaged in everyday activities and pairing them

⁵ I use the italicized *Sims* when referring to the game(s), and I use Sims when referring to the characters (or avatars) inhabiting the game.

written captions, much like a family photo album, and sharing them in fan spaces. When *The Sims 2* was released in 2004, the game design included a Story Mode. This gave players camera, album, and blog tools which allowed them to take snapshots and add text to accompany these snapshots. EA also created a means for *The Sims* fans to share these stories on their website, <http://thesims2.ea.com/>, using the *Exchange*, an online repository for *Sims* creations. Creating stories became a popular fan gaming practice, and more than 167,000 stories have been posted on the *Exchange* (May 12, 2010). With the release of *The Sims 3* in June 2009, the practice evolved again when EA moved the story tools out of the game and to their website (<http://www.thesims3.com/moviesandmore>). Online, fans have access to point-and-click design tools, such as music for soundtracks and transitions between pages, to enhance their creations. As of May 2010, there were more than 48,000 stories created on *The Sims 3* website

The Sims fans create multimodal (Kress, 2003; Kress & Jewitt, 2003), hybrid (New London Group, 1996) texts of a variety of genres. Popular genres include modding⁶ tutorials with instructions for posing Sims for snapshots and game play tutorials offering tips for meeting Sims' aspirations. Other fans create Sims Life Stories, as they are known on the *Exchange*, which document the interactions of their Sims. Still others create fictional romance, horror, or mystery stories, using Sims to represent the characters in the narratives they write. Many fans create serialized fictional stories that continue through numerous chapters or episodes. Finally, *The Sims* fans display their fandom for other media through the stories they create. Vampire romance stories, inspired by Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* (2005), are one very popular genre of *Sims* fan fiction.

⁶ A commonly-used term within gaming communities for modifying the content or structure of a game.

Fan fiction – fictional texts created by fans and derived from their fandom of a particular media such as a television show, movie, book, anime or manga series, or video game -- is a popular form of media production with a history that predates the online spaces that emerged to support the practice (Black, 2005; Hellekson & Busse, 2006; Jenkins, 1992). *Sims* fan fiction is a fan literacy practice of producing multimodal (Kress, 2003; Kress & Jewitt, 2003), hybrid (New London Group, 1996) texts which pair images and words together to tell stories using *The Sims* to visually represent the characters and settings. I use this term to recognize multiple types of fandom *The Sims* players, specifically those who are *SWH* members, engage in when creating *Sims* fan fiction. The term acknowledges that some players incorporate characters and storylines from other media into their *Sims* fan fiction. Most importantly, it honors *The Sims* fandom displayed when authors select this video game platform as the tool with which they tell their stories.

Theoretical Perspective

The broad perspectives of sociocultural and situated approaches to understanding learning and literacies inform the orientation I bring to my research on *SWH*. My sociocultural approach is rooted in Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) work, a major theme of which argues that social interaction plays a fundamental role in learning. I also draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of the situatedness of learning, which emphasizes "comprehensive understanding involving the whole person" and learning as a social process of engaging in activity "in and with the world" as the learner, the learning, and "the world mutually constitute each other" (p. 33). In this way, learning is both contextualized in and develops out of social interaction. Similarly, I acknowledge the situatedness of literacies, as do others (Barton, 2007; Gee, 2004; 2008; Heath, 1983; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007), to recognize that literacy practices influence and are

influenced by the contexts in which they occur. As Barton says, "there is not one way of reading and writing, there is not one set of practices" (2007, p. 37).

As with the other studies presented in this collection, I use Gee's (2004) "affinity space" as a framework for making sense of *SWH*. Gee puts forward his notion of a "paradigmatic" affinity space by presenting how eleven distinct features are visible within a particular gaming site (see Duncan & Hayes, this volume⁷, for a discussion of these features). Select elements of his affinity space theory inform my analysis of tensions within *SWH*. I discuss these elements in more detail below. My work is also informed by Ito and her colleagues (Ito, et al., 2010) who documented and theorized youth participation in new media practices. Their work offers a lens for understanding the potentially different motives participants have for being in the space. In what follows, I outline how affinity space theory and genres of participation (Ito, et al., 2010) apply to this analysis.

Affinity Spaces

Affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are characterized as sites of informal learning where "newbies and masters and everyone else" interact around a "common endeavor" (p. 85). It is this common endeavor, Gee argues, that provides the unity in an affinity space, not a need for shared geography, age, or other social factors. This contention that the shared affinity is the cohesive element in an online affinity space is crucial to my analysis of *SWH*. A shared interest in *The Sims* games and more specifically in *Sims* fan fiction-related practices seems to bring participants to *SWH*. However, as a participant's interest in *Sims* fan fiction wanes and an increased focus on socializing occurs, implications for the cohesiveness of the space become apparent.

⁷ Refers to Duncan, S.C. & Hayes, E.R. (forthcoming). Introduction. *New literacies in videogame affinity spaces*. S.C. Duncan & E.R. Hayes (Eds.), New York: Peter Lang.

Another critical element in defining an online fan community as an affinity space (Gee, 2004) is the opportunity to engage in “different forms and routes to participation” (p. 87). As such, affinity spaces provide “powerful opportunities for learning...because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests” (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 177). These diverse types of participation are available in *SWH*. Yet, as I describe in my analysis, such diversity of participation can be a source of tension in an online fan community. When people do not take up an available form of participation, or when the members perceive that the community favors one form of participation over another, these tensions have implications for the practices of the space.

One final theoretical element relevant to my analysis of *SWH* is leadership. According to Gee (2004), leadership in an affinity space is “porous” and leaders are seen as resources, not bosses. Leaders “don’t and can’t order people around” (p. 87). Though not the only type of leader in *SWH*, moderators do have a leadership role that does and can permit them to “boss” members around. Such regulation of the space is a point of tension among members. Of interest to my analysis are the ways members negotiate moderators who order them around. Gee’s affinity space theory, particularly these elements, helps me make sense of how the people and practices within *SWH* contribute to and negotiate the tensions in the space.

Genres of Participation

Finally, as Gee’s (2004) theory of affinity space does little to address aspects of socializing and its role as a motivating factor for participation in online communities, I looked to the work of Ito and her colleagues (Ito, et al., 2010). Their Digital Youth Project, a collection of ethnographic studies of youth engagement with digital media, offers means for conceptualizing the social media and digital practices of youth by offering insights into two genres of participation in which youth engage: friendship-

driven and interest-driven. Friendship-driven genres of participation are a way to make sense of the practices within peer groups that encourage young people to engage in digital media, such as MySpace.com and other online sites where youth gather. These friendship-driven practices focus on the socializing reasons for engaging in these spaces. Interest-driven genres of participation, on the other hand, connect well with Gee's notion of a shared affinity that brings people together in online communities such as *SWH*. Through these interest-driven practices, youth engage with others who share their interests, and such spaces transcend geographical and age-related boundaries. Ito et al's notion of genres of participation offers a way to make sense of *SWH* as a space where socializing (i.e. friendship-driven genres of participation) and *Sims* fan fiction (i.e. interest-driven genres of participation) coexist side-by-side. Viewing the tensions within *SWH* through the lens of these genres of participation helps to shed light on the diverse reasons why people spend time in these online fan spaces.

To summarize, I come to this research of *SWH* with an orientation toward viewing learning and literacies as situated and sociocultural processes. I use Gee's (2004) affinity space theory to make sense of the organization of and practices within *SWH*. Ito, et al's (2010) work with genres of participation supplements that theory with a perspective for understanding the varied motivations people have for engaging in *SWH*. Together, these theoretical lenses provide conceptual tools for analyzing tensions between *SWH* members when their participation focuses on more than an affinity for *Sims* fan fiction.

Methods

Research Context

My interests in adolescents' out-of-school literacy practices and video gaming, in particular *The Sims* series of games, led me to explore a variety of online spaces in which

adolescents engage in sharing their *Sims* creations. In my exploration of the numerous sites devoted to these practices, I discovered *SWH* in August 2008. *SWH* is an online fan site maintained and operated by adolescent fans, in which members⁸ use a discussion forum platform (ProBoards[®]) for a variety of activities around writing and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. The space began as a small Yahoo![®] Group of *The Sims* fans in 2005, and quickly became a popular fan site for *Sims*-related writing. By May 2010, *SWH* had more than 12,000 members who had contributed more than 665,000 posts on more than 31,000 different topics organized into 22 forums and 72 sub-boards. To support members' production of *Sims* fan fiction, the forums include tips for overcoming writer's block, a classified section in which writers can solicit proof-readers and collaborators, links to *The Sims* custom content available for download, and tutorials with tips about practices such as photo editing. *SWH* is a space for writers to post links to *Sims* fan fiction for readers' enjoyment and feedback. However, the space also contains forums not directly related to *Sims* fan fiction, including a *Writers Lounge* for posting non-*Sims* poetry and prose, along with a *Chit Chat* forum. Participants in the space take on the role of member or moderator. I describe each in more detail below.

In December 2008, a member started a thread titled "Is the Hangout...The Hangout?" sparking a discussion of the site's purpose. This post generated 88 replies and continued into June 2009. In this thread, members of *SWH* engaged in a discussion of the purpose of the website, aired grievances, and talked about future directions for the space. Members looked back to a time they called "The Golden Age," describing it as an ideal time in *SWH*'s existence, saying, "Thats [*sic*] when I made my closest friends" (*SWH*

⁸ Though Gee (2004) problematizes the notion of "membership" in his discussion of affinity spaces, I use the term in relation to *SWH* for two reasons. First, the site uses the term "members" to refer to those who participate in the space. Secondly, the site requires interested parties to register and receive administrative approval for an account before gaining access to the forum.

post, January 5, 2009) and, “those days were the best. I miss all of the really GREAT stories that had little editing and good story lines” (*SWH* post, March 4, 2009). By May, the tone of the conversation turned from nostalgia to rallying support for change. “So instead of mourning this, why don't the few regulars that are here now all band together and try and do something about it?” (*SWH* post, May 10, 2009). The discussion in this thread, in combination with other factors such as the release of *The Sims 3* in June 2009, initiated a “revamp” of the site, which I further discuss in the findings section.

Members. On any given day, dozens of users log into *SWH*. According to the site's Info Center, the most users online at any one time were 196, on November 15, 2006. Although specific demographic data regarding members is not available, I reviewed member profiles to get a sense of who spends time in this space. When they join *SWH*, members create a profile with a username and an avatar, and have the option to display such information as their gender, age, birthday, and location. Many of the members self-identify as adolescent females who live in Australia, the United States or Western Europe. Of the 100 members who have the most all-time posts (with 1,327 to 9,688 posts each as of February 28, 2010) only seven self-identify as males, and of those males, none were actively posting on *SWH* as of March 2010. The majority of posts come from a relatively small percentage of the membership, suggesting that many lurk in the space as silent observers (See Figure 7 for more information on posting statistics).

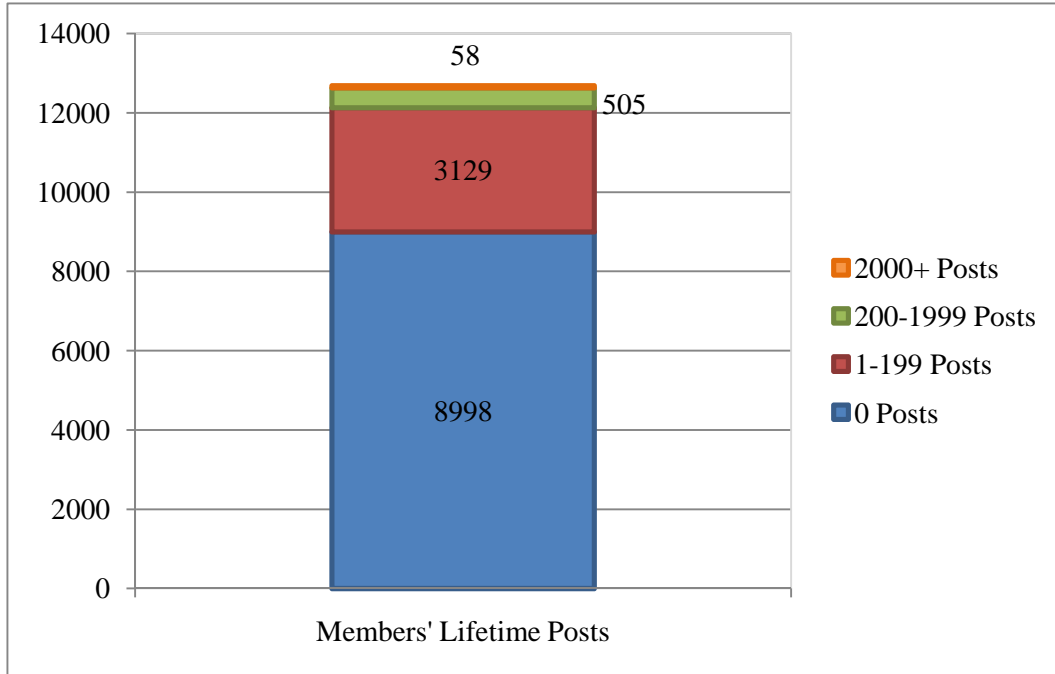


Figure 7. Posting statistics for *SWH* members. This bar graph includes all posts from the site's inception in 2005 through May 12, 2010.

Moderators. In keeping with the general demographics of the space, as of May 2010, all fifteen of the *SWH* moderators were females (though there was one male moderator in the site's past). According to their profiles, they ranged in age from 15 to 23 years old. *SWH* promotes from within, periodically soliciting applications from members interested in serving as moderators. Moderators, with titles of Hangout Helper or Senior Staff indicated prominently on their posts, serve within the space as idea-generators, contest managers, and order-keepers. As idea-generators, *SWH* moderators create and communicate new activities for the group and they played a central role in redesigning the forums during the summer of 2009. Moderators also manage site contests by developing rules, collecting submissions, and tallying votes to announce winners. One popular contest is Hangout's Next Top Model (HNTM), a Sims beauty

contest that asks contestants to create Sims models using Bodyshop⁹, and post digitally edited photos depicting the models in various scenarios that demonstrate creativity and technical skills. Finally, moderators are responsible for monitoring assigned forums to ensure that members post in the correct forum. In this order-keeper role, moderators sometimes move posts to the appropriate forum, warn members to stay on topic, or lock threads to stop an off-topic discussion.

Research Process

This study is located in the growing body of work that uses ethnographic methods in virtual environments (Hine, 2000; 2009). As such, I sought to make sense of the tensions in *SWH* by immersing myself in the space, focusing on “relationships, activities, and understandings of those in the setting” (Hine, 2000, p. 4). The study is not bounded by traditional space constraints, but draws on Leander and McKim’s (2003) conceptualization of online ethnography as a “moving, traveling practice” (p. 237). This is especially important because sharing *Sims* fan fiction on *SWH* often involves linking to other websites where stories are hosted, making *SWH* a permeable and interconnected space.

I used discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) to guide data collection. I followed “practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation” (p. 6), to examine the relationships among *SWH* members and take note of the various processes involved in creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in this space. I engaged in repeated observations of the most active forums as well as those with little to no activity, thus moving from the “core to the periphery” of *SWH*. Following these guidelines, my

⁹ A software tool used to create Sims that is separate from the video game, but was included on *The Sims 2* DVD.

ethnographic observation was more than “gazing at” the artifacts on *SWH*, but rather an attempt to get a “feel” for the site as a culture.

I observed and collected artifacts on *SWH* for two years, tracing members’ interactions and *Sims*-related creations. My repeated observation of the space helped me identify the various “forms and routes to participation” (Gee, 2004, p. 87) available in *SWH*. I then identified potential key informants whose interactions spanned different types of participation. I followed Androutsopoulos’ (2008) “practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors” (p. 6) and contacted these members through the private message (PM) system on *SWH*. Eight agreed to share their insights with me. I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews, through email or PM, to get these insiders’ perspectives. I maintained “repeated and prolonged” (p. 6) contact with most of them throughout the analysis, as they continued to confirm or inform my understanding of practices in *SWH*.

The complete data corpus for my study of *SWH* (Lammers, 2011b) includes hundreds of pages of downloaded forum posts, moderator-created norming texts, numerous *Sims* fan fiction texts, virtual interview responses, field notes capturing my observations, and artifacts collected, including those from a variety of websites hyperlinked to *SWH* posts. For this analysis, I used the “Is the Hangout...The Hangout?” thread as my starting point, looking for themes in the tensions expressed by members as they discussed *SWH*’s purpose and future direction. Though members discussed a variety of topics in this thread, this analytic process helped me to identify four themes in the conversation that describe the tensions *SWH* members felt about the practices within the space. During this conversation, members:

- raised concerns about the prevalence of interactions unrelated to *Sims* fan fiction;

- expressed frustration that readers posted more “fangirl” comments than substantive feedback on creations;
- pointed to the privileging of digital image editing as creating a lack of focus on writing;
- noted their dislike for the ways the group maintains community order, specifically by “jumping on” those who do not follow the rules.

I returned to the data corpus to find confirming and disconfirming examples of these themes in an effort to shed light on the tensions through provocative exemplars, or data that both exemplified these themes and challenged me to think deeper about them. I also sought my informants’ perspectives about these themes to add depth to what I gleaned from examining the space’s practices as an outsider (See Appendix F for a data analysis sample).

Findings

I seek to make sense of the tensions in *SWH* by exploring the practices members and moderators engage in (or not) as a means of contesting the aspects of the space, and its practices, with which they dispute. My analysis of *SWH* points to two types of findings related to understanding the relationship between practices and tensions: (1) varied use of the space was a source of many of the tensions, and (2) maintaining order in the space was a means of negotiating those tensions. Here I present data from forum threads, artifacts, and informant interviews to illustrate the practices constituting each category, building a case that questions the shared and perceived purposes of this space.

Varied Use of the Space

Tensions revealed by *SWH* members who discussed the state of their group often involved the prevalence of interactions unrelated to supporting the creation of *Sims* fan fiction. For instance, one member wrote, “I used to adore this forum when it was about

the writing. It used to be a place of brainstorming, help, and all about the stories” (*SWH* post, December 31, 2008). Practices taken up by members caused a perceived shift in focus away from *SWH* being “about the writing.” These practices included *Chit Chat* posts, contests and activities privileging digital image editing, and varied comments and feedback on *Sims* fan fiction. These types of practices constituted a varied use of the space that seem to deviate from the focus on the common endeavor of creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in this affinity space. I discuss each of these practices in turn below.

Role of Chit Chat. Articulations of the tensions around activities unrelated to creating *Sims* fan fiction often pointed specifically to *Chit Chat* posts as a source of tension, as this post indicated: “It’s supposed to be the *Writer’s Hangout*, and the chit chatting about random gossip...should come secondary” (*SWH* post, December 30, 2008). A quick scan of the discussion board’s home page revealed that the *Chit Chat* section was the most visited area of the site, containing more than 380,000 posts on a variety of non-*Sims* fan fiction topics. Six sub-boards served to organize some of the *Chit Chat* into categories (See Table 3), and the remaining 350+ pages of posts spanned numerous uncategorized topics. The longest running and most replied to *Chit Chat* thread was a game called “Person above me,” in which members posted something they knew about the person who replied before them. Replies consisted of one-liners about where a member lived, or other tidbits such as “Likes the Simpsons” or “Has the same name as my sister.” Another popular thread was titled “Things You’d Like To Tell People; TAKE TWO.” It provided a space for members to articulate what they, presumably, cannot or will not say to someone in person. Posts included one-sided conversations with deceased loved ones, retorts to bullies from school, and expressions of unrequited love, as in the following:

I make up lame excuses to see you, even if that means wasting my time talking to others so that I can burn away the minutes and seconds until you come. And, most of the time, you do. (SWH post, November 18, 2008)

Table 3

Chit Chat Forum Boards

Sub-board Name	Topics	Posts	Description
The Creativity Wing	730	5624	“Are you a poet? A song writer? Or do you have a literary skill you’d like to show. Come to the creativity wing!”
The Entertainment Area	573	42074	“Please place any topics about TV, movies, actors, music and other entertainment subjects on this board.”
Games, Quizzes, Jokes & Randomness	1053	105075	“Please place any games, quizzes, jokes and anything of the sort in this board.”
House Party	123	1287	“Got something to celebrate? Post it here!”
Relationships, Relationships, Relationships	888	8417	“Need to vent about relationships at home, work or school? Post about it here.”
Polls	1136	37763	“Here you can find various polls concerning <i>The Sims 2</i> and other stuff.”

Note. As of May 12, 2010.

With more than half of all the activity on SWH occurring around topics such as relationships, school projects, and quizzes to determine “What flavour of toothpaste are you,” it begged the questions: How did all of this *Chit Chat* contribute to the affinity space? What connection, if any, did it have to the practices around creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction? As evidenced by the replies to discussions on SWH and responses of study informants, there were no consistent answers to these questions. One of the moderators shared these thoughts about the *Chit Chat* board: “Our members shouldn't

post only there. We have several new ones who join just to post in the games, fun, and venting section, and nothing in the *Sims* sections. It's disheartening" (Pamela, personal communication, April 3, 2010). On the other hand, a *Sims* fan fiction writer with three series-in-progress posted in *SWH*'s story threads had this to say about *Chit Chat*:

I think that the *Hangout* needs the section because there are so many writers, and to create a community, you need to get people together. *Chit Chat* gives the *Hangout* a place where members become more than just random stories, but they become real people. (Angela, personal communication, April 3, 2010)

Another writer echoed this sentiment saying, "I think that the *Chit Chat* section is very important. It's where you meet people...*Chit Chat* allows you to meet people who have the same interests and opinions as you" (Eleanor, personal communication, April 5, 2010).

As a place for members to "become real people," *Chit Chat* served an important role in *SWH* by providing a space for members to socialize and "meet people." The tension remained because some, like Pamela, found it "disheartening" when members only posted in *Chit Chat*. Yet, there were members who contested this moderator's intentions by doing just that. As they were unrelated to creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction, practices within the *Chit Chat* forum constituted a use of the space that varied from a singular focus on the common endeavor of this affinity space.

The pressure to "frankenstein." Other sources of tension in *SWH* were practices in the space that contributed to the group's perceived shift in focus from the written literacies of *Sims* fan fiction to the digital image literacies. One member said, "I do miss how simple everything used to be. When it was cool to just upload an unedited picture" (*SWH* post, December 31, 2008). Another agreed, saying, "Doing a *Sims* story used to be fun for me until I felt pressured to spend hours and hours on the pictures. That

just sucked the fun right out of it” (*SWH* post, January 9, 2009). Members pointed to a specific moment in time when this shift occurred. It was,

...during the second season of HNTM [Hangout’s Next Top Model] when [name] turned in a picture that she had ‘frankensteined’ together (though nobody called it that). Everyone was astonished at the concept... (using multiple parts to make one pose? wha-?). And now look at Flickr. It’s considered odd if you don’t edit a photo up the wazoo. (*SWH* post, December 30, 2008)

The practice dubbed “frankensteining” (or “franking”) involved using a digital image editing software, such as Adobe® Photoshop®, to piece together a Sims character image with parts from multiple photos. Since the time franking first appeared during the HNTM contest, many members adopted the practice as a means to edit their Sims into poses not easily achieved or impossible within the game. Other popular digital image editing involved drawing hair on Sims to create the look of real hair and editing in background scenery unavailable in the game.

Various contests on *SWH*, even those claiming to encourage writing literacies, reinforced the emphasis on digital image editing. For example, the rules for The Big Day, a contest in which members documented the relationship of a Sims couple from their first date through their honeymoon, stated that it was a contest emphasizing “not only photography but story telling” (*SWH* post, August 15, 2008). Over the course of nine rounds, contestants submitted entries that included photos of the couple in various scenarios, such as meeting the in-laws, accompanied by a descriptive narrative. This balance between written and visual literacies broke down when the contest organizer awarded the highest ranked semi-finalist special editing privileges for her entry in the final round of competition. In announcing the award, she said, “You are allowed to frankenstein, and draw hair and clothes in your entry for the finals! Good job, and good luck” (*SWH* post, July 22, 2009). Franking gave this contestant an advantage in the image aspect of the entry, and she went on to win the contest.

Images were an important aspect of the multimodal *Sims* fan fiction that *SWH* members created. Tensions arose in *SWH* around the pressure to focus more energy on editing these images than on constructing the narratives in *Sims* fan fiction. One member described this tension by saying, “People were editing in stories, but after the ‘discovery’ of franking and simposing for contests, doors were opened for more and more people to try it minus the writing” (*SWH* post, December 31, 2008). Authors who posted on *SWH* felt this pressure to create images that met the community’s high standards, as Angela stated:

The writing part of the stories is really fun, at least for me...However, the image editing part is really tedious. A lot of people won’t read a story that has awful picture quality, as sad as that is, so most authors do feel like they have to edit their *Sims* pictures to perfection, which takes hours. (personal communication, April 15, 2010)

Pushing to achieve *SWH*’s high standards of digital image editing for *Sims* fan fiction creation was a form of participation taken up by some members of the space, and rejected by others.

Not all feedback is created equal. Another tension present in *SWH* was a concern that members were not receiving quality feedback on their *Sims* fan fiction or story ideas. One member described this tension by saying, “Since most people...post just fangirl and post nonsense (“OMG, lyk ur story iz so original!!!!), I don’t know if people actually want a critique or not” (*SWH* post, December 31, 2008). This sentiment echoed throughout the “Is the Hangout...The Hangout?” discussion:

What’s the point of posting your story ideas if people read your post but don’t bother to answer, or if they don’t post anything useful? ...Gibberish posts or posts with textspak are incredibly annoying, and many writers prefer constructive criticism to people just drooling over their stories and flattering them. (*SWH* post, April 17, 2009)

These comments pointed to varied practices and expectations around providing feedback on *Sims* fan fiction posted in *SWH*.

A review of several story threads within *SWH* revealed that while readers' posts varied, they generally contained some combination of these four types of comments: (1) admiration, (2) fangirl practices, (3) references to the reader's engagement with characters and/or the storyline, and, most rarely, (4) constructive criticism. While some readers may have posted a comment that discretely represented a single type, more often readers' posts included a combination, as in this example:

Ok let me say I love it. Zach -- yum, yum, yum. I like him a lot. He has this good guy, bad guy thing working for him. I kind of like that she didn't get the dream part, it seems more real and I am sure you have some twists in store for us. I did spot a few spelling errors, but overall the story was very well written. I look forward to chapter 2. (*SWH* post, January 31, 2006)

This response expressed admiration for the story ("Ok let me say I love it."), a fangirl statement about the male character ("Zach – yum, yum, yum."), reference to the characters and the plot, and some criticism about spelling errors.

Tensions arose around the fangirl behaviors and the purposes they served in the space. What exactly were fangirl practices and why were they a point of tension in *SWH*? A moderator informant described them to me this way:

"Fan girl" comments, would be comments that don't particularly serve a great purpose. They're usually like "OMG boy A was so hot. This whole series is super amazing. And hot! Like omg!" They're usually very childish and bias[ed] in the sense that even if the story is not very well written, they'll squeal over the creator just because they're friends or if it's of a certain, often stereotypical, genre. (Pamela, personal communication March 20, 2010)

However, fangirl practices did serve an important role in the space – they helped to motivate the authors as they continued to produce *Sims* fan fiction for their 'fans.' One informant said, "They [fangirls] can be very loyal and they usually do always leave a

review, even if it's not the sort of review you're looking for" (Eleanor, personal communication March 21, 2010). When asked to elaborate, Eleanor explained:

Receiving "fangirl" comments isn't really that bad. It's a bit repetitive and sometimes you want something a little more than what they have to say, but at the same time it's nice having some people who consistently leave nice reviews. It's also nice knowing that someone is reading your story. (personal communication, March 23, 2010)

Another author told me that fangirl comments are "nice although I'm sure everyone would much rather see what the fan thought was amazing about the story" (Eve, personal communication, March 21, 2010). From the perspective of these informants, the varied forms of reader feedback posted on *SWH* contributed to their practices of creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in the space.

Affinity spaces allow for multiple forms and routes to participation (Gee, 2004). Members use the space in varied ways, taking up those practices which most appeal to their interests, and ignoring those that do not. In the case of *SWH*, the name of the site bore witness to *Sims* writing as the intended affinity for which members may be drawn to the space. However, the language in the "About the Hangout" section of the website acknowledged it was a place for more than just writing:

Despite our specific name, we have also expanded into other areas with an extensive database on custom content sites, photoediting tutorials, game tips and tricks, name dictionaries, and much much more. ...Whether you are a writer, an aspiring writer or just someone who wants to chat with other *Sim* lovers, join our forum. (<http://www.sims2writershangout.com/about/>)

My analysis indicates such varied use of the space caused tension, especially when the practices did not seem to align with the shared purpose of creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. When examined as a means of contesting the practices members do not agree with, this varied participation takes on new meaning.

Maintaining Order in the Space

Another category of practices revealed by my analysis of *SWH* illustrated how members negotiated tensions by attempting to maintain order in the space. Practices taken up by the moderators, and some members, served to police the space and encouraged adherence to social norms, sometimes to an extreme, as noted in this post: “Things have gotten so bad here that I'm scared about whatever it is I type, just in case I get yelled at or humiliated” (*SWH* post, January, 14, 2009). Maintaining order in *SWH* involved practices to reinforce established rules, open discussions of the state of the space, interventions to change the structure and practices within *SWH*, and when all else failed, disengagement. Through these practices, *SWH* moderators sought to maintain order within the space.

Rules and other norming practices. Moderators and members alike took up practices that encouraged adherence to community norms. The importance of norming in *SWH* was presented to new members from the beginning, as a part of the Welcome Message: “Not sure where to begin? Check out ‘Finding Your Way,’ your official guide to *The Sims 2 Writer’s Hangout*. Don't forget to be a responsible member and read the rules!” (*SWH* post, April 14, 2006). In addition to this introduction to the norms, each of the individual forums, and most of the sub-boards, had a moderator-created norming post pinned to the top spot within that area. These posts explained the rules about what should and should not be posted in that area of *SWH*. As was noted in a few replies in “Is the Hangout...The Hangout?” members who failed to follow the rules set themselves up for visible correction by the community: “As soon as someone makes a double post or makes a thread in the wrong place, they will get jumped on” (*SWH* post, December 31, 2008). Though policing seeks to mitigate tension by establishing norms, it also discourages some from participating.

Maintaining order was also practiced in *SWH*'s story threads, which contained examples of moderators stepping in to admonish members who post off-topic replies. For example, in a thread designated for discussing one author's vampire romance *Sims* fan fiction series, one reply about recycling batteries in honor of Earth Week set off a string of policing replies from moderators and members alike. These replies included this from a member, "Okay, but no [*sic*] to hurt you but I think you should read the rules before double posting or staying off-topic, so you won't get banned or anything" (*SWH* post, April 22, 2008). Then a moderator stepped in to say, "If you want to talk about Earth Day, make a thread in the CHIT CHAT board, not in someone's story thread. This is bordering on absurd, and highly disrespectful. **Take this as a warning. Don't let this happen again**" (emphasis in original; *SWH* post, April 22, 2008).

Yet, members found ways to contest such policing. For example, a *Chit Chat* thread titled "Things You'd Like To Tell People" was locked by a moderator who wrote, "I'm locking this thread. You guys need to stay on topic and not turn this into your personal chit chat thread" (*SWH* post, November 18, 2008). Within minutes, a second iteration of the thread emerged as "Things You'd Like To Tell People; TAKE TWO." The member who started this thread began by posting, "Cuz the other one got locked despite most of the posts that weren't totally on topic only being half off topic...I SHALL START WITH SOMETHING I ALREADY POSTED ON THE LOCKED ONE" (*SWH* post, November 18, 2008).

Responses from study informants indicated that moderators performed an important function in *SWH* by maintaining order through policing. Specifically, one noted that off-topic posts to a story thread bumped, or moved, the thread to the top of the forum list:

I mean you see a story board that keeps getting bumped up not because it's a good story, but just because a couple of members on there are deep in a conversation about I dunno, monkeys or something >.< Kind of defeats the purpose of the thread and overshadows other peoples' stories that get pushed aside as a result. (Eastwood, personal communication, April 21, 2010)

In preventing such bumping in the story threads, moderators helped to ensure that *Sims* fan fictions did not get unfairly "pushed aside."

On the other hand, informants also noted that sometimes moderators took policing to an extreme, as Eve explained:

Even though I do agree there is a need to keep on topic I believe that some moderators took the off topic rule a little too seriously to the point that if someone wrote one sentence off topic then the thread would be locked and I think that using their power to that point isn't right. (personal communication, April 25, 2010)

As we see here, whereas moderators negotiate tensions through policing practices that encourage adherence to norms, members negotiate tensions by practices that, at times, circumnavigate these norms.

Discussing ideas. Another practice members used to negotiate tensions was to open threads for discussion about the practices and direction of the community. These conversations served as an opportunity for members to bring up and debate the ways in which members and moderators interacted in the forums. They provided an open space for members to engage in a dialog about *SWH* and to contest the practices with which they did not agree.

One such discussion occurred when Pamela posted a thread titled "*Sims (2) Writers Hangout: What do you want to see?*" She did this after she was appointed a senior moderator, and engaged *SWH* members by saying, "*The Hangout* is a forum for collective ideas and working together. Therefore, if you have an idea for a change, addition, etc, post it" (*SWH* post, June 5, 2009). This invitation to contribute received 84 replies that echoed those in the "Is the Hangout...The Hangout?" thread, which began six

months earlier. Members asked for activities that encouraged and supported writing literacies, as in this suggestion: “I'd definitely like to see a focus on writing... There could be a board for people needing help with writing a story for *The Sims* or posting *Sims* stories, a board for proofreading and critiques of writing” (*SWH* post, June 5, 2009). In addition to suggesting new boards that focused on writing, members asked for writing contests, reiterating the tension felt regarding *SWH*'s contests encouraging image editing. For example, one member wrote:

Future contests = more writing-oriented. I believe right around HNTM3 was when the writing aspect of this board began to go downhill. After that it seemed like almost none of the contests had anything to do with writing, or even storytelling. It became all about modeling/editing. (*SWH* post, June 9, 2009)

A final writing-related suggestion that appeared repeatedly in this discussion involved collaborative writing exercises: “Perhaps we should try and think of some group writing exercises that we can all join in together, which could help return some of the community feeling” (*SWH* post, June 29, 2009). Throughout this discussion, Pamela thanked everyone for contributing and in the final post she said, “I'm not sure where the *Hangout* will go in the future, and I'm not sure if all of these eventual changes will bring it back to tip top shape, but we won't let it go down without a huge fight” (*SWH* post, August 8, 2009).

A similar discussion began at the close of 2009, after *SWH* had undergone its “revamp” that attempted to address many of the suggestions from previous debates. Another moderator posted a thread titled, “*Sims Writers Hangout: Ideas, Anyone?*” which garnered 35 replies. Again, respondents expressed similar ideas for encouraging writing literacies: “We could have a weekly writing contest. Examples of ideas for this: draw people in with one line, describe a character/setting, write a short story (would be from 1,000-1,500 words), enticing story names” (*SWH* post, December 6, 2009). However, in

this conversation, one of the moderators countered these ideas by expressing frustration at the membership's lack of participation in such activities. She wrote, "The last thing I want to do is shut down ideas, however, before we can take the time to launch the mentioned ideas, [the writing activities we already have] should take off first" (*SWH* post, December 6, 2009). This same moderator came back later in the discussion to reiterate her frustration:

We tried the revamp; we tried new ideas; we tried a lot of things however it seems like nothing we've done has worked so far. Everyone is responsible for them self and where they choose to post...No one can make you post in a place you don't want to. (*SWH* post, December 13, 2009)

These discussions are a form of negotiation in which members and moderators open a space to debate the practices of *SWH*. On the one hand, these debates are activities that may be rewarding to members. On the other hand, such conversations can be read as an indication of a lack of shared purpose as they reveal the tensions within the space. As seen in the excerpts from these discussions and the other findings presented on the varied use of the space, such discussions do not always lead to corresponding changes in members' practices. However, sometimes they do lead to changes, as in the interventions described next.

Interventions within the space. Another form of negotiation that arose as a response to the tensions within *SWH* was that of intervention. At certain times in the site's history, moderators stepped in to intervene and make changes that attempted to address the tensions and maintain the order of the space. These interventions served as moments of self-correction in which the members and moderators of *SWH* turned the site in a different direction and reshaped the space. One example of an intervention was found within the rules to the popular HNTM contest. Recall that this contest often received credit (or blame) for encouraging increased emphasis on digital image editing.

During the first iteration of this contest, the rules included the statement, “Photo-editing is allowed but this is not a photoedit competition” (*SWH* post, December 27, 2005). A similar line in the rules for the fourth season of HNTM read, “Photo-editing is allowed – but it will not be necessary for all rounds – this is not a photo editing contest. However if you need help don’t be afraid to ask” (*SWH* post, April 14, 2010). Thus, in the fourth iteration of HNTM, a contestant was encouraged to seek help with photo editing. This rule change served as an intervention designed to maintain order in *SWH*. It did this by attempting to correct the community’s tension regarding the perceived focus on digital image editing.

In fall 2009, *SWH* moderators initiated a “revamp” to negotiate tensions in the space at the time, including the release of *The Sims 3* a few months earlier. In late September 2009, many of the forums were unavailable as staff members worked to make changes to the space in response to the concerns members raised in “Is the Hangout...The Hangout?” and other discussions about the purpose of *SWH*. This revamp involved multiple interventions, including reorganizing the space, removing unused forums, and adding new forums for writing and *The Sims 3*-related activities. On October 4, 2009, the site re-appeared, sporting a new look with a member-created, community-voted banner and many new forums. The site’s name also changed from *The Sims 2 Writers’ Hangout*, dropping the “2” to indicate that it was a space for both *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3* writing. A moderator announced the “revival” of the space with a post titled “*The Hangout Returns!*” detailing the changes and proclaiming that *SWH* was “back and better than ever” (*SWH* post, October 4, 2009).

This dramatic intervention was a critical moment when the tensions reached a level that warranted suspending the site for a short time to allow the site moderators to make structural changes to the space. Their efforts were designed to minimize tensions,

encourage increased participation among members, and welcome *The Sims 3* players to the site.

Forms of disengagement. A final means of negotiating *SWH*'s tensions was evident when members disengaged from the space. This disengagement took the form of non-participation in certain activities or, in more extreme cases, members leaving the site altogether.

As I already noted, tensions existed around the writing-related activities in *SWH*. Moderators did attempt to encourage writing through a variety of activities, but these activities received little attention from the members who contested their existence in the space by ignoring them: "Writing contests fail to get hardly any members to participate" (*SWH* post, January 9, 2009). For example, in 2008, one moderator created a role-play forum, in which members were to use creative writing, but no pictures, to depict characters engaging in a fictional boarding school setting. This forum quickly disappeared within weeks when it became clear that few members were participating. Similarly, little attention was paid to an activity called "What's the story" in which members were asked to write a creative story to explain a moderator-posted photo from *The Sims 2*. The activity explanation and inaugural image was posted on October 5, 2009. For more than two months, the post remained unanswered until six members engaged in the activity in December 2009. There was never another image posted to encourage more writing and the thread remained inactive after these six members posted.

Another way that members negotiated the tensions within *SWH* was by choosing to leave the space altogether. Though some did so silently, there was a "Holiday/Leaving the Hangout thread" on *SWH* that gave members a place to announce their departure. Posts in this thread offered glimpses into the reasons that some chose to disengage. Some expressed their disinterest with *Sims* fan fiction writing, "I just want to play *The Sims*

normally to be honest - no custom content, no stories just game play” (*SWH* post, January 12, 2008). Others pointed to the lack of writing focus on the site as their reason for leaving, “The *Hangout* really isn't what it used to be. I'm finding it to be flooded by this random mass of people who seem less than interested in writing, or *The Sims* for that matter” (December 21, 2008). One member’s farewell post pointed specifically to her time spent in the *Chit Chat* forum as a reason for leaving:

I haven't been posting that much, and it seems like I'm limiting those posts to this very board [*Chit Chat*], instead of the ones related to *The Sims 2*. Maybe it's because I don't really look at the *Hangout* as a *Sims 2* forum anymore; it's becoming just a place to chat for me. (*SWH* post, December 29, 2008)

Study informants also referred to this idea of disengagement as an option members had for contesting practices they did not agree with. When asked about members who expressed frustration about practices in *SWH*, one informant said, “If they have a problem with how this website is then they should just make their own” (Zahrah, personal communication, April 14, 2010). While such a statement was never directly posted within the space, the sentiment may have been felt by those who chose to disengage and take their fandom elsewhere. Given the numerous fan sites devoted to *The Sims*, members certainly had options other than *SWH*, including posting *Sims* fan fiction to their own blogs and websites, as Zahrah suggested.

Discussion

This analysis of tensions reveals ways in which *SWH* practices support Gee’s (2004) affinity space theory, thus providing another example of this theory in action in a game-based online fan site. The analysis also reveals ways the theory is insufficient to describe and make sense of all the tensions in *SWH*, thus providing an opportunity for expanding our understanding of affinity spaces.

As an illustrative example of an affinity space, *SWH* is a site in which members engage in “different forms and routes to participation” (Gee, 2004, p. 87). Members can choose the route of author wherein they create and share *Sims* fan fiction for other members to read. Within this form of participation, authors take up those practices that most appeal to them. Some develop an interest in digital image editing and may incorporate community-encouraged practices, such as frankensteining, to enhance their creations. Authors may choose to focus more on written literacies, and develop such expertise by engaging in some of the writing activities sponsored by *SWH*. Besides the authoring role, moderating exists as a role others take up, wherein they engage in practices around maintaining order in the space. Numerous other forms of participation, such as competing contests and commenting on *Sims* fan fiction, are available to all *SWH* members. By engaging in such varied participation, *SWH* members tap into an affinity space organized around *Sims* fan fiction that expands their game play well beyond what is available in *The Sims* game design.

In addition to exemplifying an affinity space, some practices within *SWH* push us beyond Gee’s theory to make sense of the whole space. This analysis uncovered ways varied use of *SWH* results in tension as members engage in activities that do not directly contribute to the common endeavor of creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. For example, as we have seen, posting in *Chit Chat* does not directly contribute to members’ creation or sharing of *Sims* fan fiction. Nevertheless, it is a significant practice constituting extensive amounts of member participation. Nothing in the affinity space theory helps us to make sense of *Chit Chat*, which comprises more than half of all posts in *SWH*. None of Gee’s (2004) elements of an affinity space address such socializing disconnected from the common endeavor of the space. However, the prevalence of *Chit Chat* pushed me to understand its purpose in *SWH*. I believe that *Chit Chat* appeals to the

friendship-driven genres of participation (Ito, et al., 2010) of *SWH* members and adds depth to their experiences within the site. *Chit Chat* posts, as socializing, are a form of “hanging out” in which young people interact in seemingly off-topic conversations. The availability of such conversations motivates members to visit *SWH* and engage in the forums. To understand these spaces more completely, I propose drawing from the work of Ito et al to account for the important role socializing plays in motivating people to participate in online fan sites. While the “common endeavor” (Gee, 2004) still serves as a primary and/or initial draw to the space, members clearly value *The Sims Writers’ Hangout* as a space for “hanging out” (Ito, et al., 2010). As such, there are multiple affinities bringing members to a site like *SWH*, blurring boundaries between friendship- and interest-driven genres of participation. Online communities need to appeal to both genres of participation, rather than remaining singularly focused only on the common endeavor of the affinity space. After all, what is a space like *The Hangout* for, if not for hanging out?

Another way this analysis of tensions within *SWH* calls for an expansion of our notion of affinity space centers on leadership. Moderators, and their policing practices, distinguish *SWH* as an affinity space unlike the “paradigmatic” ideal presented by Gee (2004, p. 85). On one hand, these leaders help to establish norms that offer members guidance for how to be in this space. On the other hand, the ways moderators take up disciplinary roles runs counter to the leadership roles that Gee discusses as being a part of affinity spaces. Leaders in *SWH* do “order people around” (p. 87) in ways not expressly articulated by Gee. They lock threads containing off-topic posts and they correct members who are not following the rules. These practices also seem necessary to maintain order in *SWH*. I believe we can gain further insight into these practices by drawing on Bernstein’s (1996) model of “pedagogic discourse” to expand our

understanding of leadership practices in affinity spaces. His model provides general principles for understanding how knowledge is transformed into pedagogic communication. With this model, policing practices and rules posted by moderators serve as the regulative discourse that “creates order, relations, and identity” (p. 46) in the space (Lammers, 2011a). Moderators engage in a regulative discourse that “creates the rules of social order” (Bernstein, 1996, p. 48) in *SWH*, without which members may not be able to take full advantage of the resources available for creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. Thus, the moderators, through ordering people around, support the “common endeavor” of the affinity space (Gee, 2004).

In closing, this analysis of *SWH* advances our understanding of literacies and learning in informal contexts by helping to create a more complete picture of the complex nature of participation in online affinity spaces. It does so by focusing on tensions and how they are negotiated to reveal practices that indicate a lack of singular, shared focus on creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction among members. Young people are spending increasingly more time creating and sharing content online, thus it is important for literacy researchers to look for ways that participation in online affinity spaces expands what we know about literacy and learning theories. Though Gee’s affinity space theory (2004) served as a useful lens to make sense of *SWH*, it was equally important that my analysis made visible the practices not accounted for in the theory. Because online environments continue to evolve and change, continued research into the ways literacies and learning shape and are shaped by these spaces needs to evolve. We ought to do more than just document how existing theories are reflected in online environments. We need to look for ways to expand our theories to account for the “new” literacies in videogame affinity spaces.

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CHAPTER 4

COLLABORATIVE LITERACIES: STUDYING SIMS FAN FICTION FROM A DESIGN PERSPECTIVE¹⁰

Adolescents spend increasing amounts of time creating and sharing content online (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). In doing so, they engage in new social practices involving reading, writing, and other modes of communication (i.e. digital image sharing, social networking). Online, adolescents connect with others who share their interests by participating in affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) organized around shared passions. Video games are one such interest drawing adolescents and adults alike to online affinity spaces. For example, *The Sims* series of video games attracts a diverse group of players to numerous fan-created websites. Within these online affinity spaces, participants learn various literacies to participate in and organize the space. Unlike transmission models of traditional schooling, wherein expert teachers deliver content to novice students, literacy learning in online affinity spaces occurs through collaboration and meaningful activities, engaging experts and novices alike.

This study sheds light on a particular set of online literacy practices around adolescents' creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. Players create multimodal texts by combining digital images captured in the game with written text. Though numerous websites exist around this literacy practice, my study focuses on *The Sims' Writers Hangout (SWH)*, a space where members, primarily adolescents and young adults, use discussion forums for a variety of activities to support writing and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. The purpose of this study is to explore the literacies one adolescent female uses

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to participate in *SWH*, and to understand how such participation shapes her *Sims* fan fiction.

Background

To provide background for my study, I begin by defining *Sims* fan fiction. I then situate my project within the broader context of fan fiction research, highlighting specific studies of adolescent-created fan fiction in online environments.

What is *Sims* Fan Fiction?

The Sims series of video games is the most popular PC game of all time, selling more than 125 million copies worldwide by the franchise's tenth anniversary (EA Play Label, 2010). A life simulation game, *The Sims* invites players to create families, design homes, and interact in an open-ended platform 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, including clothing, hairstyles, and home furnishings, to be downloaded into an individual's game. A widespread network of online sites exists to support this practice, where gamers share content, discuss game play, issue challenges, post cheat codes, and much more.

One popular gaming practice is fans' documentation of their *Sims* engaged in everyday activities (Note: I use the italicized *Sims* when referring to the game and I use *Sims* when referring to the characters, or avatars, in the game). Initially, *The Sims* game design did not allow for this documenting, so players used other means, such as combining screen shots with written narratives in word processing software. Thus began a fan literacy practice of producing multimodal (Kress, 2003; Kress & Jewitt, 2003), hybrid (New London Group, 1996) texts combining images and words to tell stories using *Sims* characters. With the release of *The Sims 2* in 2004, the game included a Story Mode giving players a camera tool to take snapshots, along with album and blog tools for

adding accompanying text. Albums could be uploaded and shared with other *Sims* fans worldwide through the *Exchange* available at <http://thesims2.ea.com/> (See Figure 8 for an example). Creating stories became a popular means of playing *The Sims 2*, and more than 167,000 stories are posted on the *Exchange* (May 12, 2010). With the release of *The Sims 3* in June 2009, EA moved the story tools online, giving players access to web-based, point-and-click design tools, including music for soundtracks and transitions between pages. As of May 2010, there are more than 48,000 stories available on *The Sims 3* website.

Sims fans create stories in a variety of genres. Some create game play tutorials, offering tips on ways to meet Sims' aspirations, or "modding" tutorials with instructions for posing Sims for snapshots. Others document their Sims' interactions, creating Sims Life Stories. Still others create fictional stories on varied topics, including romance, horror, or mysteries, using Sims to represent the characters in the narratives. Some players take on larger projects, creating serialized fictional stories continuing through numerous chapters or episodes. Finally, some *Sims* fans display fandom for other media through their stories. For example, with *Harry Potter*-inspired "fannish *Sims* narratives" (Stein, 2006, p. 255), fans create Sims to represent their favorite characters in the series and explore their domestic lives. One popular story depicts the adolescence of Harry's parents using *The Sims*.



Figure 8. Screenshot from Angela's *Sims* fan fiction. This is an image from the *Exchange*. I altered it to remove Angela's name listed in the "Created By" field.

I use the term *Sims* fan fiction to describe the multimodal story telling practice of *SWH* members. I do so to recognize multiple types of fandom at play. First, the term acknowledges that some players base their narratives on characters from other media, such as television shows, movies, books, anime, manga, or video games. The term also honors the *Sims* fandom displayed by authors who select this video game as the tool to tell their stories.

Studying Fan Fiction

Fan fiction – fictional texts created “by fans about preexisting plots, characters, and/or settings from their favorite media” (Black, 2008, p. 10) – is a popular form of media production that began long before online communities existed to support the practice. The earliest forms were art and fanzines created by science fiction fans in the 1930’s. Media fandom, in particular, developed in the 1960’s around the television shows *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* and *Star Trek* (Coppa, 2006). In one of the first academic explorations of fan fiction, Jenkins (1992) found that fans displayed their fandom by producing stories, art, performances, songs, and movies, blurring “any clear-cut distinction between media producer and media spectator, since any spectator may potentially participate in the creation of new artworks” (p. 247).

As online fan fiction communities increase in popularity, these practices continue to gain recognition as an area of research. Jenkins (2006) shared the story of Heather, a home-schooled teenager so inspired by how the *Harry Potter* books encouraged kids to read that she launched *The Daily Prophet*, an online school newspaper for the fictional Hogwarts, to encourage kids to write. Heather managed a global staff of more than 100 children, who each created a fictional identity inspired by the books and produced fan fiction news stories of the imaginary school they co-constructed. Thomas’ (2006; 2007a; 2007b) study of two female youth engaged in collaborative, hybrid role-playing and fan fiction shed light on how “their writing crosses a range of online and offline spaces, and extends into the production of multimodal texts” (Thomas, 2007b, p. 160). Creating fan art, such as paintings, graphic novels, and fan songs, known as “FILK,” these girls extended their fan fiction in a manner Thomas described as mono-polymorphic, indicative of a single narrative “[traversing] a range of media, styles, genres, and time to become a single rich and complex narrative” (p. 160).

Much of the research of adolescents' online fan fiction practices offers implications for literacy educators. Chandler-Olcott and Mahar (2003) sought to make sense of two middle school girls' fan fiction writing, to better "understand youth culture and make school literacy instruction more responsive to learners' needs" (p. 557). Their study of Rhiannon and Eileen's process revealed how the girls engaged in online reading and viewing of anime, inspiring collaborative, multimodal fan fiction creations they displayed on self-made webpages. The researchers argued that students' interests and skills around fan fiction could be "tapped" by teachers as one way to "reposition some adolescents as capable literacy learners" (p. 565). Rebecca Black's (2005; 2007; 2008) work also posited lessons for schools. Her ethnographic study of fanfiction.net yielded insights into how this site allowed English language learners (ELLs) to participate in authentic writing practices leading to increased access to and affiliation with identities as English writers. Fanfiction.net afforded these ELLs access to a global audience of networked readers who scaffolded language learning through peer reviewing, teaching, and learning in ways not typically available in school.

Relatively little research of *Sims*-related fan fiction exists. Stein's (2006) essay on "fannish" storytelling introduced the fan practice of creating *Harry Potter*-inspired narratives illustrated in *The Sims* and posted on LiveJournal.com. She described how *The Sims*, which emphasizes interactions inside the home, allowed fans to explore characters' domestic lives in ways that extended the novels. Additionally, representing *Harry Potter* characters as Sims "[emphasized] the expansiveness of fan imagination rather than the limitations of canon, specifically overthrowing any reign of the *Harry Potter* films as canonical for characters' physical appearances" (p. 256). In another exploration of *Sims* fan fiction, Gee and Hayes (2010) juxtaposed a *Sims* fan fiction author, Alex, with Stephenie Meyer, author of the *Twilight* series of vampire romance on which Alex based

her stories. By focusing on each author's relationship with her fans in online spaces, Gee and Hayes illustrated how "Stephenie and Alex, as writers and readers, professionals and amateurs, are closer than such types of people have ever been before" (p. 144). My study contributes to this research by offering new insights into how one author leverages her participation in *SWH* in ways that shape her *Sims* fan fiction.

Theoretical Perspectives

The broad perspectives of sociocultural and situated approaches to understanding learning and literacies inform the orientation I bring to my research. My sociocultural approach is rooted in Vygotsky's (1962; 1978) work, a major theme of which argues that social interaction is fundamental to learning. I also draw on Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning, which emphasizes "comprehensive understanding involving the whole person" and learning as a social process of engaging in activity "in and with the world" as the learner, the learning, and "the world mutually constitute each other" (p. 33). In this way, learning is both contextualized in and develops out of social interaction. Similarly, I acknowledge the situatedness of literacies (Barton, 2007; Gee, 2004; 2008; Heath, 1983; Lankshear & Knobel, 2007; Street, 1984) to recognize how literacy practices influence and are influenced by the contexts in which they occur. As Barton says, "there is not one way of reading and writing, there is not one set of practices" (2007, p. 37). Informed by the New Literacy Studies (Gee, 2008; Street, 2003; 2005), my conceptualization of literacies considers contexts beyond cognitive and psychological factors. I apply this theoretical perspective to *SWH* by recognizing members' posts and *Sims* fan fiction as socially-situated literacies shaping and shaped by this specific context.

Affinity Space

Gee's (2004) "affinity space" concept serves as my framework for making sense of *SWH*'s organization. Gee characterizes affinity spaces as sites of informal learning

where “newbies and masters and everyone else” interact around a “common endeavor” (p. 85). Gee argues this common endeavor, rather than shared geography, age, or other social factors, provides unity in an affinity space. The common endeavor bringing players to *SWH* is their interest in *The Sims* games, and more specifically in *Sims* fan fiction-related practices. Gee puts forward his notion of a “paradigmatic” affinity space by presenting eleven distinct features visible in such spaces. Below, I explain the three features of particular relevance to this analysis of *Sims* fan fiction.

Within affinity spaces, participants have opportunities to enact “different forms and routes to participation” (Gee, 2004, p. 87). Affinity spaces provide “powerful opportunities for learning...because people can participate in various ways according to their skills and interests” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 177). *SWH* is organized into forums catering to different purposes related to community building, creating, and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. Members can engage in passive participation by lurking, or viewing and reading content without posting. Members can also actively participate by posting fan fiction, critiques, and praise for others’ creations, or by serving as a resource for others. Still others serve leadership roles as moderators of forums and/or contests. All forms and routes to participation are available to members of *SWH*, allowing their skills and interests to guide their engagement.

The ways “both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged” (Gee, 2004, p. 85) are also relevant to this analysis. In affinity spaces, displays of expertise “are highly variable and contingent on activity and context at any given moment” (Black, 2008, p. 39), thus participants may have knowledge about one aspect of creating *Sims* fan fiction, but not others. *SWH* encourages members to display, gain, and leverage “intensive,” or specialized, knowledge around various aspects of *Sims* fan fiction. For example, posing *Sims*, much like in real life photography, is an important element of

capturing images for these multimodal fan fictions. There are forums in *SWH* devoted to sharing photo-taking advice wherein members display intensive knowledge by creating tutorials, answering others' questions, and sharing posing cheat codes. *Sims* fan fiction authors can develop their intensive knowledge from these resources, or leverage the knowledge of others by asking experts to create photos for them. Members also display "extensive," or broad, knowledge about story writing and *The Sims* as they create fan fictions and share them for others to read. In these ways, *SWH* engages members in practices that encourage displaying, gaining, and leveraging both intensive and extensive knowledge.

Finally, ways "both individual and distributed knowledge are encouraged" (Gee, 2004, p. 86) in affinity spaces informs this analysis. Participants display their individual knowledge by contributing to the space. While engaging in these displays, individual knowledge becomes part of the distributed knowledge of the group, shaping future interactions and creations (Black, 2007). In *SWH*, fan fictions display one's individual knowledge and skills related to *The Sims*, writing, and oftentimes, digital image editing. Members can also share tutorials or answer others' questions, helping to create the distributed knowledge available in the space. Members can tap into the distributed knowledge network of *SWH*. "Such knowledge allows people to know and do more than they could on their own" (Gee, 2004, p. 86). Together, these theoretical conceptualizations of learning, literacy, and the organization of *SWH* form the prism through which I view data for this analysis.

Methodology

My interests in adolescents' out-of-school literacy practices and *The Sims* led me to explore online communities where adolescents share their *Sims* creations. I discovered *SWH* (<http://similik.proboards.com/>) in August 2008 and selected it as a primary focus of

research because it is created by and for adolescents, to support their endeavors as *Sims* fan fiction writers. *SWH*, an online discussion forum maintained and operated by its members, began as a small Yahoo!® Group in 2005, and quickly outgrew that platform as it became a popular fan site for *Sims*-related writing. At the time of my study, almost five years later, *SWH* had more than 12,000 members who had contributed over 665,000 posts on more than 31,000 different topics organized into 22 forums and 72 sub-boards (May 12, 2010). The forums included tips for overcoming writer's block, a classified section for writers to solicit proof-readers and collaborators, links to *Sims* custom content available for download, and tutorials offering help with practices such as photo editing. The space also contained forums not directly related to *Sims* fan fiction, including a *Writers Lounge* for posting non-*Sims* poetry and prose, and a *Chit Chat* forum.

Participants

While this article focuses on one *Sims* fan fiction author, Angela (pseudonym), she does not create her texts in isolation. To begin explaining the ways others inform her *Sims* fan fiction, I provide a general description of the members and moderators in *SWH* below. The collaborative nature of participation in an online affinity space causes these members and moderators to be peripheral participants in this study.

Members. Dozens of users log into *SWH* daily. Although specific demographic data regarding members is not available, I tried to get a sense of who spends time *SWH* by reviewing profiles. Members create profiles with a username and avatar, and have the option to display demographic information including gender, age, birthday, and location. Many self-identify as adolescent females who live in the United States, Canada, or Western Europe. Of the 100 most prolific posters (ranging from 1,327 to 9,688 posts each as of February 28, 2010), only seven self-identify as males. A small percentage of

members post the majority of content, suggesting that many lurk in the space as silent observers.

Moderators. Some members take on roles as moderators. As of May 2010, all fifteen *SWH* moderators were female (there was one male moderator in the site's history). Moreover, for those whose profiles listed information, ages ranged from 15 to 23 years old. These moderators, with titles of Hangout Helper or Senior Staff indicated prominently on their posts, serve as idea-generators, contest managers, and order-keepers. As idea-generators, *SWH* moderators create and communicate new activities. They played a central role in redesigning the forums during the summer of 2009. Moderators also manage contests by developing rules, collecting submissions, and tallying votes to announce the winner. Finally, moderators monitor assigned forums to ensure that site rules are followed. In this order-keeper role, moderators sometimes warn members to stay on topic, move posts to a more correct location, or lock threads to stop an off-topic discussion.

Angela. At the time of our interviews, Angela was a 15-year-old female, living in a rural area of the northeastern U.S. A high school freshman, Angela's favorite school subjects were English and Science and she aspired to "teach English classes as well as become a famous author down the road" (Angela, personal communication, January 25, 2010). She joined *SWH* in August 2009, introducing herself by saying "I like to write stories, so I figured I'd join. I'm [Angela]" (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009).

Angela remembers first watching her older brothers play *The Sims* and then beginning to play when she was 11 years old. She first visited *The Sims Resource (TSR;* www.thesimsresource.com), a popular fan site for custom content, with her mom to download content for her brothers. When she received her own copy of *The Sims*, she returned to the site "in hopes of creating prettier Sims with nicer clothes, skin, etc."

(Angela, personal communication, January 25, 2010). On *TSR*, she was introduced to *Sims* fan fiction. Angela said she looked at the stories “just for their pretty covers at first, and then I finally decided to check one out. It happened to be one of my favorite stories...and it was actually the inspiration to create my own.” She posted her first *Sims* fan fiction, a fantasy story about a teenage boy’s struggle with his sexuality, on *TSR* on July 6, 2008.

In August 2009, Angela heard about *SWH* while reading *Sims* fan fiction posted on the *Exchange*. A member had included an ad for *SWH* in her story and Angela searched for the site and joined. Angela immediately created a thread for a story she was writing and began reading others’ fan fiction while she “waited for somebody to check out [hers]” (Angela, personal communication, February 9, 2010). Angela logged into *SWH* nearly every day to vent in the *Chit Chat* forums and follow the progress of fan fiction she enjoyed. *SWH* has been instrumental in her development as a writer because “members actually read the stories a lot more closely and try to give really good advice” (Angela, personal communication, February 20, 2010). Angela learned early on that “*The Hangout* was serious business” when the first fan fiction she posted on *SWH* garnered critical reader responses. She was encouraged to “describe the settings, don’t rely on the pictures to tell us what the rooms look like” (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009). She was also told, “In all honesty, I expected better from what I saw in the cover” (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009). To date, she has created threads for five different series on *SWH*. She initially hosted her creations on the *Exchange*, but in December 2009, Angela created her own website on webs.com and now hosts her *Sims* fan fiction there.

Data Collection

My study is part of a growing body of research using ethnographic methods to make sense of virtual environments (Baym, 2000; Black, 2008; Bury, 2005; Hine, 2000;

2009; Rheingold, 2000). In the tradition of this work, I view the “Internet as a culture where the uses people make of the technology available to them [is] studied” (Hine, 2000, p. 9). I sought to make sense of *SWH* by immersing myself in the space, “[using] that experience to try to learn how life is lived there” (Hine, 2009, p. 6). In defining the boundaries of my field, I drew on Leander and McKim’s (2003) conceptualization of online ethnography as a “moving, traveling practice” (p. 237) and thus followed informants’ *Sims* fan fiction-related activities wherever they led. This was especially important because Angela’s practices moved between *SWH*, the *Exchange*, and her own website.

To guide my data collection, I used discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) as I examined the relationships among members and took note of the various processes involved in creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction in *SWH*. Following “practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation” (p. 6), I mapped out the forums in *SWH* and read informational texts posted by moderators within each forum. This gave me an initial sense of the literacy practices used throughout the space. I then repeatedly observed the most active forums and those with little to no activity. I read threads with posts by the most prolific members and moderators, and then those posted by newer members, thus moving from the “core to the periphery” (p. 6) of *SWH*. During these observations, I read forum posts and followed hyperlinks wherever they pointed. In these ways, my ethnographic observation was more than simply gazing at artifacts on the site, but rather an attempt to get a feel for *SWH* as a culture.

This initial data collection phase lasted 12 months. Based upon these repeated observations in *SWH*, I identified potential key informants, including moderators, longtime members, popular authors, prolific posters, and new members, whose interactions spanned different types of participation. Following Androutsopoulos’ (2008)

“practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors” (p. 6), I contacted informants through the private message (PM) system on *SWH*. Eight agreed to participate. To get these insiders’ perspectives, I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews, through email or PM. I customized interview questions based upon observations of each informant’s interactions and artifacts within *SWH*, and maintained “repeated and prolonged” (p. 8) contact with most of them throughout the next 12 months of data collection and analysis, as they continued to confirm and inform my understanding of practices in *SWH*.

The complete data corpus includes hundreds of pages of downloaded forum posts and moderator-created texts, numerous *Sims* fan fictions, interview responses from informants, field notes capturing my observations, and artifacts collected, including those from websites hyperlinked to *SWH* posts. Data sources for this paper include Angela’s 189 posts (as of March 1, 2010), responses she received from other members, *Sims* fan fictions hosted on her website, and interview responses.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using New London Group’s (1996) Designs of Meaning (DoM). A component of this seminal work to reconceptualize literacy pedagogy from a multiliteracies perspective, the DoM framework represents “the ‘what’ of literacy pedagogy” (p. 11). This conceptual tool provided a means for analyzing literacy practices on *SWH* as semiotic activities involving three elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned. Studying data from this semiotic perspective connected with my data collection process, as Androutsopolous’ (2008) approach focused my attention on “the dynamics of communication and semiotic production within web environments” (p. 5). The DoM framework also connected to Gee’s (2004) affinity space

theory. For example, DoM's emphasis on the role of Available Designs recognized these resources as part of the distributed knowledge of an affinity space.

Through the DoM tool, I viewed creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction as progressing, though not always sequentially, through the following process:

1. Authors draw on story-telling conventions, patterns of other *Sims* fan fiction, and literary elements such as genre and voice (Available Designs).
2. Authors work on and transform these available resources, making choices about modes of communication, to create a desired meaning (Designing).
3. Authors create a finished *Sims* fan fiction product (The Redesigned).
4. Others read this *Sims* fan fiction, making new meaning from the texts (Designing).

My analysis involved tracing the development of Angela's *Sims* fan fiction on *SWH*, beginning with her first mention of an idea in a *Story Ideas* thread, through her *Classified* post requesting a proof-reader for drafts, to the continued release of completed chapters in a *The Sims 3 Bookshop* thread. I also included responses she received from other members. Each discussion board post, and materials linked therein (e.g., *Sims* screen shots on Photobucket.com and chapters hosted on her website), became a point in the Design process. I categorized data according to which element(s) (Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned) the literacies represented, based on how I understood them, and informed by Angela's interview responses about her *Sims* fan fiction (See Appendix G for a data analysis sample). Finally, I shared parts of my analysis with Angela, asking her to confirm or correct it, as necessary.

Findings

In this section, I share findings that illustrate the nature of Angela's participation in *SWH* as seen through a DoM lens. I provide examples from discussion posts, interviews, and her *Sims* fan fictions that represent the Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned elements of her Design process. While presented here as discrete elements for ease of discussion, in practice, these elements often overlapped and Angela's Design process followed a messy, recursive path, rather than a neat, sequential pattern.

Available Designs

Available Designs are those Design conventions, or socially-constructed patterns and resources, available for use in the activities of a semiotic system. They include the "form of discourses, styles, genres, dialects, and voices" (New London Group, 1996, p. 12) people draw from to participate in any semiotic activity. As Angela participated in *SWH*, she drew on Available Designs from multiple offline and virtual contexts. These contexts included story-writing (e.g. dialogue and character development), life experiences, (e.g. inspiring her characters and plot lines), the *Sims* game design (e.g. *Sims* avatars and the Story Mode), and *SWH* (e.g. discussion posts and *Sims* fan fictions). My analysis revealed that throughout her Design process, Angela took up various Available Designs from these multiple contexts to create her own *Sims* fan fictions.

Offline Available Designs. Angela recruited story-writing conventions as Available Designs for her *Sims* fan fictions. For those stories she told in a series of installments, Angela often wrote a prologue and then released subsequent chapters, modeling Available Designs she recognized from novels. She followed certain narrative writing conventions, weaving dialogue and description together to create a scene. Her

Sims fan fictions contained many examples of Angela's use of these Available Designs, including this excerpt:

‘You’d think I’m a comedian with the way you laugh, babe,’ I say as I shake my head at her. I walk across the dark wooden floor to the television and turn around, once again facing her.
Clara is still giggling, her charcoal hair falling over her shoulders as she does so. With the way the sunlight hits her pale skin, one could easily mistake her for an angel. To me, there is no difference. (Angela, *Legally Dead*, March, 16, 2010)

She also utilized various literary techniques when creating her *Sims* fan fictions. In discussing one story about longtime teenage friends whose class schedules no longer allowed them to see each other as often, Angela wrote that she planned to use a secret meeting place established by the characters as a central feature of her text. She explained, “I thought of maybe having the story start at the meeting place with a few flashbacks to earlier years” (*SWH* post, August 16, 2009). Angela was mindful of the ways in which openings needed to engage readers, without revealing too much of the story. One technique she used was to drop readers right into the action of a scene, as was the case for this beginning of a story (See Figure 9). Note that in this example, Angela applied the Available Design to both the written and visual modes of this page, dropping the readers into a group of characters dancing with her words and the corresponding image.



Figure 9. Screenshot of the first page of a *Sims* fan fiction. This image was captured on the *Exchange* and is the opening of one of Angela's *Sims* fan fictions.

Angela also drew on her own life experiences as Available Designs for her *Sims* fan fictions. These resources were most visible in the characters she created and the storylines she pursued. According to Angela, “I write mostly using teenagers as the characters for I don't want to try and sound like an adult and come up shy” (personal communication, February 20, 2010). She recognized the importance of creating an authentic voice and thus often wrote *Sims* fan fiction with teens as her main characters. Angela also drew on Available Designs from her personal experiences for plot inspiration. Such resources included her friends' lives: “*April's Mercury* is actually based on a true story about a friend of mine and her best friend” (Angela, personal communication, March 14, 2010); her childhood dreams: “When I was younger, I always wanted to be a figure skater. I watch it on TV sometimes and I was watching it when I decided I wanted to write about a skater;” and even her classes: “The idea for this story

came from one Science class in December when we were learning about heart transplants. My teacher brought up the term ‘legally dead,’ and my mind wandered to the story.” Through a DoM lens, these story-writing conventions and life experiences were seen as offline resources, or Available Designs, for Angela to recruit into her *Sims* fan fictions.

Virtual Available Designs. *The Sims* game itself provided Angela with virtual Available Designs on which to draw while creating her *Sims* fan fictions. Angela acknowledged that some of her story ideas came directly from the interactions her Sims had in the game. For example, one story “was inspired by the relationship a Sim could have when they're adopted, have magical powers, and can't stand their new life. ...Again, it was all inspired by the game itself” (Angela, personal communication, March 14, 2010). Another story came “from a neighborhood I was creating in the game. I wanted to make all of the families have individual and nice houses, and then I wanted to write about a group of teens.” The game platform also provided Angela with tools for taking snapshots and the Story Mode functionality for pairing those images with her narrative to create *Sims* fan fictions.

Angela’s participation in *SWH* gave her access to other virtual Available Designs in the form of discussion forum posts. In order to position herself as an insider in the space when she participated, Angela needed to follow the conventions of other posts. For example, to announce the impending release of a story, Angela posted a cover image, summary, character images, “spoiler,” – intriguing excerpt from the story – and statistics about her progress. In doing so, she applied the Available Designs of other *Coming Soon* posts available on *SWH*. To ask for the assistance of a proofreader, Angela posted the following request in the *Classified* forum:

Hey guys. I'm looking for a proofreader for my new story, *If You Leave*. Just a few requirements.

1. Know your stuff, like grammar and whatnot.
2. Be reliable.
3. Color code the changes, just so I know what I did wrong.
4. Be able to get at least the prologue back to me within **two weeks**.

Oh, btw, I have the story saved in one document and I only need the prologue and the first chapter proofread. It's fine if you send them back one at a time. I'd like two proofreaders. (emphasis in original; *SWH* post, October 9, 2009)

This post exemplified the conventions of other request posts in *SWH*. Before making requests, Angela acknowledged that she “read the rules of the boards probably twice each and read so many different request threads by members...it was helpful to read what others had said” (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

Finally, other *Sims* fan fictions served as resources for Angela. For example, she recalled the influence of the first story she read on *TSR* saying, “It happened to be one of my favorite stories for about a year after I'd first looked at it, and it was actually the inspiration to create my own” (Angela, personal communication, January 25, 2010). Angela also noted her appreciation of what she called “pretty covers” on other *Sims* fan fictions. She drew on this Available Design, as evidenced by her own cover images, which included digitally edited *Sims* snapshots and stylized titles (See Figure 10). This analysis made *The Sims* video game platform, the *SWH* discussion posts, and others' *Sims* fan fictions visible as virtual Available Designs for Angela to take up in her Design process.



Figure 10. Angela's cover for *Legally Dead*. Angela created this cover by digitally editing images of *The Sims* characters from her story with text and the heart image.

Designing

Design, according to the New London Group (1996), is an iterative process of meaning-making involving “re-presentation and recontextualization” (p. 13) of the Available Designs in a given context. Designing is the work a reader, writer, or listener does to make meaning in a semiotic activity. Angela’s Designing around *Sims* fan fiction took place outside of and within *SWH*. Her Design work outside of *SWH* included writing stories, capturing and editing images, and uploading to her website. Within *SWH*, Angela engaged in Designing as she solicited, and then responded to, feedback from other members and requested various contributions from experts in the space.

Designing outside of *SWH*. Much of the Design work Angela did outside of *SWH* involved the actual writing of her stories. This process included development of

her story ideas and characters, writing the narratives, and capturing and editing *The Sims* images. Once she formed an idea, Angela took to *The Sims* to create the characters and settings through which she would enact the story. Part of this process included setting up neighborhoods, creating Sims, and then moving the story's action forward visually by both posing Sims into desired scenes and watching the game unfold. In one instance, Angela's Design decision to include images of a character (Evan) singing and dancing came from her engagement with the game: "[the singing] just went on for so long because I enjoyed watching Evan dance, ha" (*SWH* post, August 11, 2009). Angela talked about Designing multimodal *Sims* fan fictions this way: "The writing part of the stories is really fun, at least for me, and when you're taking pictures as you write, it's generally also fun and helpful when writing. However, the image editing part is really tedious" (Angela, personal communication, April 15, 2010). She commented that Designing "takes hours" to edit images to convey her desired message.

Sometimes Angela's Design decisions related to her technology. She acknowledged how using Microsoft® Word and PhotoFiltre affected her Designing, posting "I don't use Photoshop, so there's a limit to what I can create on my computer" (*SWH* post, September 20, 2010). At times, her computer constrained her Design decisions because it could not accommodate the graphics requirements of the game. For example, Angela posted "So, my computer is being an imbecile as always and takes forever to take a screenshot on *The Sims 2*. The next chapter, since I'm halfway through it, will have a lot less pictures than the first one did" (*SWH* post, September 5, 2009). Angela also made Design decisions about where to host her *Sims* fan fiction, posting some in the *Exchange* and others on her website. When asked about what directed this Design decision, Angela said she posted "the longer stories on my website....because I can work on them even when I don't have time to play the game" (personal

communication, March 14, 2010). Each of these actions and decisions to create *Sims* fan fictions constituted part of the Design work Angela did outside of *SWH*.

Designing within *SWH*. Much of the Design work Angela did to create *Sims* fan fiction took place within *SWH*. Angela took advantage of the *Sims Stories: Advice, Ideas, and Tips* forum as a place for posting emerging ideas for feedback. Months before Angela shared the completed first chapter of *Legally Dead* on *SWH*, she posted her idea for a *Sims* fan fiction based upon a character with cardiomyopathy and concluded the post with “Feedback?” (*SWH* post, December 12, 2009). She also solicited feedback as she finished stories and/or chapters. When she released them with announcements in a story-related forum on *SWH*, Angela often included statements such as, “Hey everyone! Chapter two is out now! I'll admit that it's not my favorite. I'd still like some advice or whatever on it, though” (*SWH* post, December 22, 2009).

Angela's responses to members' feedback indicated that she intended to incorporate their suggestions into future *Sims* fan fictions. For example, one member posted this about one of Angela's stories: “Maybe describe the settings, don't rely on the pictures to tell us what the rooms look like” (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009). To which Angela responded, “I'll try to remember to describe the settings in the next chapter” (*SWH* post, August 10, 2009). Another member gave Angela feedback about how to alert her readers when switching point of view (POV): “Perhaps for the next chapters, if you are going to change POV's you should make it obvious, like have each persons [*sic*] name at the top of the first slide that has their POV” (*SWH* post, August 11, 2009). Again, Angela acknowledged the feedback and indicated the way in which she planned to address the concern in future chapters: “I'll try and remember to add like a little name tag to the screen shots whenever it switches point of views to make it easier to understand” (*SWH* post, August 11, 2009). When asked about how she felt about receiving

constructive feedback, Angela said it “made me learn to take time on my stories and actually develop some good plotlines” (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

In addition to requesting and responding to feedback, Angela’s Design work within *SWH* included tapping into resources available in the space by soliciting expert assistance. In response to criticism about the first *Sims* fan fiction she shared on *SWH*, Angela decided to use proofreaders during her Design process: “I’m going to get a proofreader for the future chapters to make sure I’m submitting better quality work” (*SWH* post, August 11, 2009). Angela reported having mixed results with *SWH* proofreaders saying,

I think the idea is wonderful, but my proofreaders have never really stuck with me for more than a chapter or two...Proofreaders do seem to work for everybody else on the *Hangout*, but I think I’m going to stick with having my family proofread for me. (personal communication, March 14, 2010)

Another way Angela leveraged her participation in *SWH* while Designing involved her requests for photos. As already noted above, Angela’s technology sometimes hampered her ability to Design the images she wanted for her *Sims* fan fictions. To overcome this, she posted requests for others to Design images for her stories. One such request read,

Hey guys. I’m writing a story called *If You Leave* and I’m going to need some help actually finishing the cover/banner. ...Be sure to put like a little made by (insert your name here) thing on it. I love giving credit! (*SWH* post, September 20, 2010)

For this request, Angela posted photos of the *Sims* characters and details about the story, asking members of *SWH* to Design a cover to accompany her *Sims* fan fiction. For another story, Angela wanted “a diverse collection of teenage *Sims*” (personal communication, February 20, 2010), and decided to post a request in *SWH* rather than Designing the images herself. In this request, she wrote, “I need pictures of teen couples

for the layout on the story site. ...The shots can be taken as close or as far away as needed, and the Sims can look however you please” (*SWH* post, January 1, 2010).

Finally, though Angela’s Design process leveraged many resources available to her in *SWH*, she made very little use of the tutorials available in the space. In fact, Angela said that she only ever looked at one tutorial “about creating custom [sic] story covers for the game. It was very helpful, considering I’ve been doing it ever since” (personal communication, February 9, 2010). As a space in which Angela requested feedback that informed her creations and solicited expert assistance, *SWH* was an integral part of her Design work.

The Redesigned

According to the New London Group (1996), The Redesigned is the product of a meaning-maker’s Design work. It is neither a “simple reproduction” of Available Designs nor a “simply creative” (p. 13) unique production. Rather, The Redesigned represents an outcome of Design with a “ring of familiarity” that connects it to the context in which it was created and represents a transformation resulting from the Design process. Angela’s *SWH* forum posts and her *Sims* fan fictions are all examples of The Redesigned products she created.

Angela’s *SWH* forum posts displayed both her familiarity with the context’s conventions and her unique Design work to create them. As noted earlier, her *Coming Soon* posts included expected elements, such as a plot summary, character descriptions, and statistics about the story’s completion. However, these posts were unlike any others in the space in that they announced the impending release of her unique *Sims* fan fictions. Similarly, her posts in the *Classified* section to request photos and proofreaders relied upon the Available Designs of other such requests. Yet, these posts also represented Angela’s recontextualization of the practice. For example, Angela acknowledged that her

request for *Sims* photos was unique, noting, “I don’t think very many of the members, considering it’s a *Sims* community site, would have thought of somebody asking for pictures of Sims” (personal communication, February 20, 2010).

Angela’s *Sims* fan fictions also served as The Redesigned products reminiscent of the resources she used and evidence of her own Designing to transform those resources. Following the conventions of other *Sims* fan fictions, Angela’s products included stylized covers that attracted readers, as noted in this member’s post: “Ah! I like the cover! *goes to read*” (*SWH* post, August 11, 2009). Comments she received about her work reflected the ways Angela’s products exemplified The Redesigned, as in this example: “Kind of sort of reminded me of Bella and Edward’s relationship (not to bash your writing or anything if you hate *Twilight*, don’t get me wrong their relationship is very lovely in its own way)” (*SWH* post, September 5, 2009). This *SWH* member saw the influence of the popular young adult novel, *Twilight* (Meyer, 2005), but also acknowledged the unique nature of Angela’s product. As representations of The Redesigned, Angela’s *SWH* forum posts and her *Sims* fan fictions are products of her meaning-making, reflecting the Available Designs she took up and the Design work she did to make them her own.

Discussion

My analysis identified the literacies Angela used to participate in *SWH* as components of her Design process. These components included her use of Available Designs from multiple offline and virtual contexts, her Design work outside of and within *SWH*, and The Redesigned products she created. Angela leveraged her participation in *SWH* to shape her *Sims* fan fictions in ways that made it a collaborative endeavor. The analysis pointed to ways in which Angela participated in various story-related forums throughout her Design process, floating ideas for feedback and incorporating such

feedback into her future creations. The analysis also indicated ways Angela tapped into the distributed knowledge of *SWH*, requesting the assistance of proofreaders and collaborating with others who had specialized, or intensive, knowledge. Finally, being a member of *SWH* allowed Angela to enact a form of participation guided by her skills, interests, and technology constraints, as she incorporated *Sims* images from members who answered her requests. In these ways, the literacies Angela recruited for participation in *SWH* shaped her *Sims* fan fictions into a collaborative Design process.

This analysis of Angela's *Sims* fan fiction practices contributes to literacy research in ways that inform our understanding of adolescent and digital literacies. In her commentary on the relevance of adolescents' online literacy practices, Alvermann (2008) argued "...online and off line literacies are not polar opposites; thus, to reify distinctions between them serves mainly to limit understandings of how each informs the other." My analysis of how Angela recruited Available Designs from offline and virtual contexts while Designing *Sims* fan fictions illustrates how each informed the other. The ways she drew upon her life for story ideas, followed story-telling conventions, communicated in the *SWH* discussion forums, and published her work on her personal website serve as illustrations for how Angela's online and offline literacies worked in concert. My analysis is also an answer to Leu's (2009) call for research capturing the continuous change happening as the Internet impacts our literacy lives (see also Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009). Angela's literacy life was impacted by her use of the Internet to tap into the distributed knowledge available on *SWH* to shape her writing. My exploration of *Sims* fan fiction captures an understanding of these literacies from a Design perspective, and contributes to our growing understanding of the changing nature of digital literacies.

In addition, as an example of using DoM to make sense of literacies, my study informs our understanding of this theory and its application as an analytic tool for future research. This tool made visible the ways in which creating *Sims* fan fiction exemplified a Design process involving Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned as I categorized Angela's literacies according to my understanding of these elements. By focusing my attention on the relationship these elements have with each other and the *SWH* context, the tool shed light on the collaborative nature of the literacies Angela recruited to create and share *Sims* fan fictions in this context. Thus, my study adds to previous research (including Black, 2005; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003) that also drew on New London Group's (1996) theory, extending this work by applying the theory as an analytic tool in a new way.

Finally, my study of the collaborative literacies Angela recruited to participate in *SWH* has implications for classroom literacy learning. In this online affinity space, Angela was encouraged to participate in ways that matched her skills and interests. She tapped into the distributed knowledge network in *SWH*, leveraging the expert knowledge of others to create her own *Sims* fan fictions. These central features of the affinity space are unlike experiences available in the standardized mode of instruction often seen in today's literacy classrooms (Black, 2008; Gee, 2004). Educators can draw on this study as a model for encouraging similar collaboration in the classroom. What if writers' workshops were facilitated through an online discussion board that modeled *SWH* with student-created forums, tutorials, and resources in which students served as a distributed network of collaborators and readers? Such an environment would allow students to develop areas of literacy expertise and work together to Design in ways that honor intensive knowledge, opening up possibilities for increased student engagement and

motivation. Angela was motivated to spend many hours Designing *Sims* fan fictions.

Imagine if students had similar motivation to Design academic literacies.

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CHAPTER 5

RETHINKING LANGUAGE IN AN ONLINE FAN COMMUNITY:

A PEDAGOGIC DISCOURSE PERSPECTIVE¹¹

Internet use among young people continues to rise, with 93% of American teens connected to the web (Zickuhr, 2010). Online, adolescents are increasingly plugged into a participatory culture (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Weigel, & Robison, 2006) tapping into networks where they produce and consume media and knowledge. Within these networks, adolescents learn to participate in and organize sites of informal learning.

As young people spend more time in online spaces, literacy researchers continue to call for close study theorizing adolescents' online practices (Alvermann, 2008; Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009; Moje, 2009). Existing research tells us that these online "affinity spaces" serve as informal learning environments for adolescents to develop a variety of interests and skills in ways that contrast with traditional schooling (Gee, 2004). Other educational research sheds light on the ways in which these spaces support participants' learning of computational literacy (Steinkuehler & Johnson, 2009), scientific reasoning (Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2009), and information technology fluency (Hayes & King, 2009).

The analysis presented here is part of a larger study to explore literacies and learning in an online fan community (Lammers, 2011). In this paper, I turn my attention toward how online spaces *teach*. I do that by exploring the "pedagogic discourse" (Bernstein, 1990; 1996; 2000; 2004) in one online, video game-related fan site made up of adolescents who come together to create and share *Sims* fan fiction. I argue that there is pedagogy at work in this space. In other words, there is "curriculum, teaching,

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evaluation, and social relations” (Davies, 2001, p. 4) even in this informal learning environment. The following questions guided my inquiry: What is the nature of pedagogy in *The Sims Writers’ Hangout (SWH)*? How is knowledge communicated (transmitted) to *SWH* members (the acquirers)?

To make sense of instructional interactions in schools and the educational policies that shape those interactions, sociolinguists and educational researchers have used Bernstein’s (1990; 2000; 2004) theories of pedagogic discourse. Bernstein’s theories make visible the rules that establish and transmit officially sanctioned knowledge. They point to the ways in which issues of power and principles of control shape pedagogic discourse. While others have applied Bernstein’s theories to make sense of pedagogy in formal, school-based adoptions of online technologies (Marsh, 2007; Robertson, 2007; Tyler, 2001) and pedagogy related to informal literacies (Moss, 2000; Williams, 1999), none have similarly explored pedagogy in informal online learning environments. However, structures do exist that impact how knowledge is transformed and how power and control shape pedagogic communication in these online spaces.

Using Bernstein’s framework as a lens through which to view the pedagogic interactions within *SWH* makes visible the relationship between regulative and instructional discourse in *SWH* and the ways in which participants recontextualize other discourses as they transform knowledge into pedagogic discourse in this online affinity space. Without a formal curriculum, the community co-constructs what officially-sanctioned knowledge is needed to become a writer in general and a *Sims* fan fiction writer in particular. This paper contributes to our knowledge about language and learning in online spaces by offering a Bernsteinian analysis of the pedagogy in an informal, online learning environment organized around creating and sharing media.

Theorizing Pedagogic Discourse

Throughout his career spanning more than 40 years, Bernstein continued to refine and test his conceptualization of pedagogic discourse. As such, the terminology he used to describe pedagogic practice and the rules that determined its transmission through discourse, changed over time. In this section, I explain my understanding of a portion of Bernstein's pedagogic discourse theory, namely one principle within the pedagogic device: the recontextualizing rules. As I will explain, viewing my data through this lens makes visible the ways *SWH* de-locates discourses from their original site and recontextualizes them for the community's purposes.

To continue, I first offer a brief introduction to Bernstein's theory. I then focus more directly on his concept of recontextualizing rules. In explaining the theoretical lens through which I viewed my data, I also begin to make connections between Bernstein's theory and the pedagogic practices visible in *SWH*.

The Pedagogic Device

With a focus on studying the sociology of pedagogy, Bernstein sought to answer the question: "Are there any general principles underlying the transformation of knowledge into pedagogic communication?" (2000, p. 25). To answer this question, he offered the model of a pedagogic device as a way to describe the "intrinsic grammar" of pedagogic discourse (p. 28). He focused not on the content of the messages relayed by teachers, but rather on "the constitution of the relay itself" (p. 25), as it exists in a pedagogic relationship between a "transmitter" and an "acquirer" (Bernstein, 2004). Bernstein's pedagogic device is comprised of a set of interrelated, hierarchical rules: distributive rules, recontextualizing rules, and evaluative rules. In brief, the distributive rules distribute knowledge to different social groups and set limits for what is thinkable and unthinkable. Within these limits, recontextualizing rules then move knowledge from

its original site into a pedagogic site, constructing the what and how of official knowledge to be relayed. Finally, the evaluative rules provide the criteria transmitted and acquired by students.

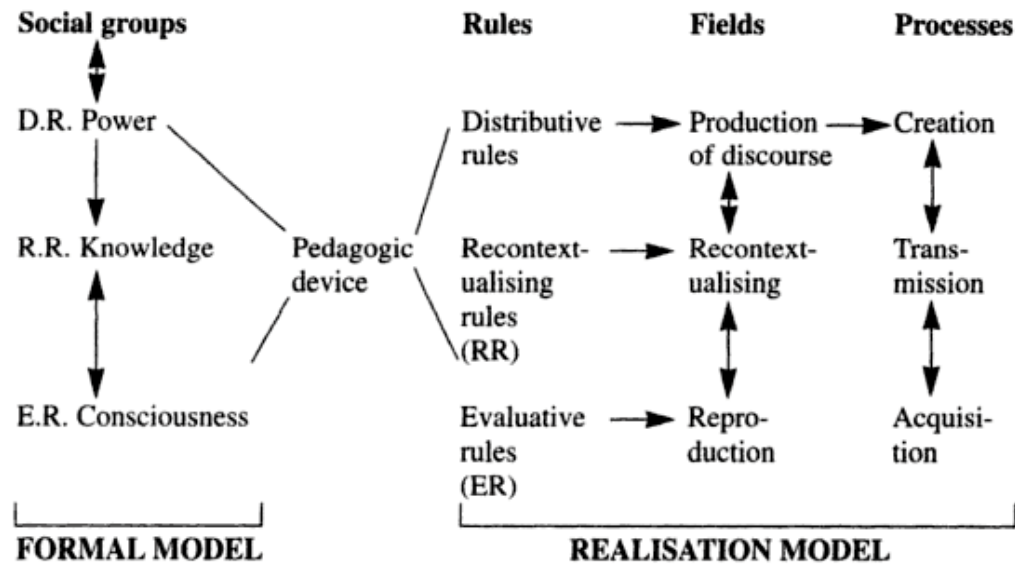


Figure 11. Bernstein's model of the pedagogic device. Bernstein used this graphic to represent the hierarchical relationship between the rules comprising the pedagogic device (Bernstein, 2000, p. 116).

Figure 11 represents how Bernstein articulated the relationship between these rules (formal model on the left) and how they establish fields and processes (realization model on the right) shaping the pedagogic discourse. In other words, the distributive rules represent how power shapes the ways in which knowledge is distributed to different social groups, the recontextualizing rules regulate how knowledge is shaped within the pedagogic discourse, and the evaluative rules define the criteria that is transmitted and acquired through pedagogic discourse. I now continue by further describing the makeup of the recontextualizing rules and the ways they are enacted in pedagogic discourse.

Recontextualizing Rules

Recontextualizing rules address the process of taking a discourse from its original site and moving it to a pedagogic site. These rules determine the what and the how of the pedagogic discourse. According to Bernstein, “pedagogic discourse is constructed by a recontextualizing principle which selectively appropriates, relocates, refocuses, and relates other discourses to constitute its own order” (2000, p. 33). He offers an example of a Physics classroom to illustrate that the recontextualizing rules are at play when decisions are made about what Physics skills and knowledge will be included in the curriculum, and what will be left out. Determining order of instruction and how the material will be delivered is also a function of recontextualizing.

Also in his discussion of recontextualizing rules, Bernstein theorizes that pedagogic discourse is a combination of two types of discourse: *instructional discourse* that creates skills in a subject area and regulates their relationship to other skills, and *regulative discourse* that creates social order, relations, and identity. He represents the relationship between these discourses as an equation (See Figure 12) to illustrate that instructional discourse is embedded within the dominant regulative discourse. Referring back to Bernstein’s Physics example, pedagogic discourse embeds the official curriculum of skills and knowledge related to Physics within the discourse of management that a teacher uses to create the social order of the Physics classroom. By emphasizing the dominance of regulative discourse in pedagogic practices, Bernstein’s theory points to ways in which schools act as mechanisms of social control.

$$\text{PEDAGOGIC DISCOURSE} = \frac{\text{INSTRUCTIONAL DISCOURSE}}{\text{REGULATIVE DISCOURSE}} = \frac{(\text{ID})}{(\text{PD})}$$

Figure 12. Bernstein's equation illustrating pedagogic discourse. This equation illustrates that instructional discourse is embedded within the dominant regulative discourse (Bernstein, 2000, p. 32).

Through Bernstein's pedagogic discourse lens, the instructional discourse in *SWH* is made up of interactions providing members with the skills they will need to participate in this online space, including instruction related to creating *Sims* fan fiction and instruction related to navigating the discussion forums. Examples of these instructional interactions are photo-editing tutorials that offer guidance in creating effective visuals, writing exercises that help members generate story ideas, and critique guides that instruct members in how to give meaningful feedback to other writers. As will be discussed further in the findings section, this instruction is embedded within *SWH*'s dominant regulative discourse comprised of all of the site's rules and instructional posts that create the social order of the space. It also includes instances when *SWH* moderators either comment on discussion threads to scold members for inappropriate posts or even lock the threads entirely in an attempt to end an inappropriate discussion.

Literature Review

Bernstein's pedagogic discourse theory has been used as a lens for making sense of pedagogy as enacted in a variety of state-regulated educational settings (see (Chouliaraki, 1998; Christie, 1995; Clark, 2005)). Only a few researchers have applied this theory to the study of pedagogic discourse related to online learning and informal literacies, both of which are important contextual considerations for my study of *SWH* and *Sims* fan fiction. What follows is a review of what this literature has to tell us about the use of Bernstein's concepts in these contexts.

Pedagogic Discourse of Online Learning

Marsh (2007) explored the relationship between policy and early childhood literacy pedagogy in the UK, specifically around the use of technology in primary literacy instruction. She drew on Bernstein's concepts of Official Recontextualizing Field (ORF), the field constructed and monitored by the state, and Pedagogic Recontextualizing Field

(PRF), the field created by teacher educators, professional development trainers, and textbook and curriculum authors (Bernstein, 1996) to examine changes in literacy pedagogy over a ten-year period. Marsh analyzed a 3-week early literacy lesson plan posted on an official curriculum website and compared the use of technology in this state-sanctioned plan with a case study of an ICT (information communication technology) specialist who worked with primary students on a blogging project. She found Bernstein's recontextualizing fields concepts "very useful in tracing the limited and difficult relationship between research, policy and practice and how this ensures that education continues to perpetuate disadvantage and social exclusion" (Marsh, 2007, p. 272). Her use of Bernstein's theory illustrates how it sheds light on the outside influences shaping classroom pedagogic discourse.

In a study of what shapes vocational education teachers' practices when e-learning technologies are incorporated with face-to-face teaching, Robertson (2007) also used Bernstein's ORF and PRF concepts (with Activity Theory) to explore the relationship between outside influences and teachers' influences on pedagogy. Robertson found Bernstein's notion of recontextualization helpful to "operationalize the mechanics" (p. 13) shaping pedagogic practice and consider the role of e-learning software developers within the recontextualizing field influencing pedagogy.

At a time when his own university system was shifting resources to expand funding for off-campus education, Tyler (2001) employed Bernstein's notions to theorize the pedagogy of hypertext in educational contexts. Driven by an interest in making sense of the "convergences and affinities" (p. 350) between hypertextuality and pedagogic discourse, Tyler used his self-made web resource for teaching a first-year college course in Northern Australian Studies as a context for expanding Bernstein's theory of the pedagogic device. He questioned assumptions about hypertext as a means of providing

readers freedom to navigate a space by allowing them to click on links willfully. Tyler explored the hidden curriculum of hypertext and argued that, in creating a site and making choices about what to connect via hyperlink (or not), website authors regulate pedagogic interactions. Tyler argued that Bernstein's theories made visible the ways in which "institutional forms may be seen to be reproduced in the communicative and organizational logic of the virtualized field" (p. 357) making online learning environments open to the same kinds of inquiry about the processes of social and cultural reproduction that happen in traditional classrooms.

As illustrations of how his concepts can be applied to digital media and e-learning pedagogy, these studies contribute to our understanding of Bernstein's theory. However, none use Bernstein's framework to explore *informal*, digital media-related learning spaces as I do in this analysis of *SWH*. I now turn to a review of studies that explore the pedagogic discourse of informal literacies to illustrate how Bernstein's theory has been employed to make sense of literacy practices existing beyond the walls of a formal classroom.

Pedagogic Discourse of Informal Literacies

Moss (2000) used Bernstein's pedagogic discourse theory, specifically the notions of horizontal and vertical discourse (1996), to study middle- and working class children's understanding of media texts, such as *WWF Wrestling*-related media, in informal environments. Additionally, she examined how media literacies are honored (or not) in formal educational settings. The findings of Moss' study align with Bernstein's (1996) ideas that horizontal, or informal, discourse exists only in a limited, present moment and context, whereas school-based vertical discourse is organized such that knowledge is acquired in a developmental trajectory with an "orientation to the future" (Moss, 2000, p. 50). According to the children Moss interviewed, media texts should

remain separate from school contexts so as not to be “run over by school routines and school ways of doing things” (p. 59). In regard to differences along social class, Moss found that middle class children recognized the vertical nature of school-based literacies, whereas working class did not. She attributed this difference to the ways pedagogic practice creates different trajectories for children of different social classes. She saw Bernstein’s theories as a means for making visible the rules governing such outcomes of pedagogic discourse.

In a study on joint book-reading events in two contexts (at home led by parents and in school led by kindergarten teachers), Williams (1999) conducted linguistic analyses of numerous book-reading sessions. He then used Bernstein’s concept of the pedagogic device to explore how family-based practices while reading aloud are recontextualized in school settings. Williams called into question the partnership metaphor used by schools and researchers who tout the importance of reading aloud to children as a way to foster a home-school connection. The Bernsteinian analysis of his data revealed that schools adopt the practices of higher socioeconomic families, and then promote them back out to the community, including to lower socioeconomic families, as “best practice.” Focusing on recontextualization made the rules around joint book-reading, both in school and in homes, visible in Williams’ data.

These two studies contribute to our understanding of informal literacies using Bernstein’s theories. By applying a pedagogic discourse lens to make sense of informal literacy practices, such research helps to counter assumptions about informal literacy practices not being governed by a system of rules. My analysis will also show that literacies in an online fan community are similarly governed by the rules of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 1990; 1996; 2000; 2004).

Methodology

Research Context

SWH (<http://similik.proboards.com/>) is a discussion forum website created and managed by a group of *The Sims* fans interested in the story-writing practices associated with playing the video games. The site began as small a Yahoo!® Group in 2005. By the time of my research, *SWH* had grown to more than 12,000 members who had created more than 665,000 posts on more than 31,000 different topics organized into 22 forums and 72 sub-boards (as of May 12, 2010). While *SWH* is not a depository for hosting *Sims* fan fiction texts themselves, it has forums that support members' creation of *Sims* fan fiction in a variety of ways. It has designated forums for sharing story ideas for early feedback, space for sharing links to completed *Sims* fan fiction, and a variety of boards that connect writers with resources such as tutorials, custom content, and a classified section for posting requests for help with photo-editing and proofreading. *SWH* also has boards unrelated to *Sims* fan fiction, including a *Writers Lounge* for sharing non-*Sims* writing and *Chit Chat*, a space to socialize by answering quiz questions or venting about personal relationships.

Members. The original creator of *SWH* described its members as, “a group of simmers who loves to hangout, chit chat, read and write stories, enter competitions, download lots of cc [custom content], and help each out with anything and everything” (http://thesims2.ea.com/mysimpage/pod.php?user_id=2914369). When they join *SWH*, members create a profile in which they have the opportunity to include an avatar image and self-report their age, gender, and location, in addition to providing their email address, website(s), and instant messenger screen name(s). Though precise demographic information for the members was not available, by reviewing member profiles I determined that the majority of *SWH* members self-report as adolescent or young adult

females, primarily living in the United States, Australia, and western Europe. Only seven of the 100 members who posted the most in the space (with 1,327 to 9,688 posts each as of February 28, 2010) listed their gender as male. As with many online fan communities (Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004), a small group of *SWH* members contributed the majority of the posts, indicating that many members lurk, or spend time on the site without posting messages.

Moderators. Some *SWH* members also have leadership and moderating duties within the space. In keeping with the site's demographics, all of the moderators at the time of my study were female, though there was one male moderator in the site's history. For those who shared the information on their profiles, the 15 moderators ranged in age from 15 to 23 years old (on May 12, 2010). Moderators' profiles and their discussion forum posts display their status with designations of Hangout Helper or Senior Staff listed prominently under their names (see Figure 13 for an example of how a moderators' discussion board posts indicate their status). As a function of their duties within *SWH*, moderators create rule posts to dictate the norms for member participation. They also monitor discussion board threads to ensure that the posts remain on topic and follow the space's rules. Finally, moderators create and manage various activities and contests in the space.

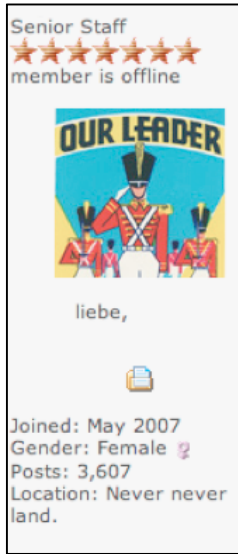


Figure 13. Screenshot showing Pamela's moderator rank. To the left of every *SWH* post, items from a member's profile appear. This image was taken from one of Pamela's posts and illustrates how her Senior Staff status displays on all of her posts. I altered it to remove references to Pamela's identity.

Study informants. To deepen my understanding of what it means to participate in *SWH* beyond what I could observe as an outsider, I sought the perspectives of eight informants. These young women had varied levels of engagement with the site as evidenced by the length of time they had been a member, number of posts, activities they engaged in, and their roles in the space. Table 4 provides a synopsis of Angela, Eastwood, Eleanor, Eve, Missy, Naomi, Pamela, and Zahrah (all names are self-selected pseudonyms).

Table 4

Information about Study Informants

Pseudonym	Age*	Location	Date Joined SWH	Posts*	Role in SWH*	SWH Activities
Angela	15	United States	Aug. 10, 2009	280	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, sharing story ideas, posting requests, using proofreaders, writing non- <i>Sims</i> stories
Eastwood	19	England	Apr. 4, 2006	633	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, using proofreaders, entering contests
Eleanor	18	England	Aug. 24, 2005	5675	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, role play, writing My Chemical Romance (a band)-inspired fan fiction, writing non- <i>Sims</i> short stories
Eve	23	United States	Oct. 17, 2005	3843	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, creating <i>Sims</i> movies, entering contests, creating photo editing tutorials

Missy	23	England	Feb. 17, 2006	1591	Moderator	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, moderating and entering contests, moderating forums
Naomi	18	United States	May 22, 2008	714	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, proofreading, using proofreaders, writing non- <i>Sims</i> short stories
Pamela	18	Canada	May 11, 2007	3409	Head Moderator	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, moderating and entering contests, moderating forums, welcoming new members, managing the site
Zahrah	22	United States	Dec. 9, 2007	2228	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, answering requests, moderating a contest, creating custom content

Note. All informants identified themselves as female.

* As of June 1, 2010.

Data Collection

My study is part of a growing body of research using ethnographic methods to explore virtual environments (Baym, 2000; Black, 2008; Boellstorf, 2008; Bury, 2005;

Fields & Kafai, 2009; Hine, 2000; Rheingold, 2000). In the tradition of this work, I view the “Internet as a culture where the uses people make of the technology available to them [is] studied” (Hine, 2000, p. 9). To make sense of *SWH*, I immersed myself in the space, “[using] that experience to try to learn how life is lived there” (Hine, 2009, p. 6). I drew on Leander and McKim’s (2003) conceptualization of virtual ethnography as a “moving, traveling practice” (p. 237) and thus followed informants’ *Sims* fan fiction-related activities wherever they led online, rather than defining my field site as limited only to the confines of the *SWH* website.

I used discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) to guide two years of data collection. Following “practice-derived guidelines for systematic observation” (p. 6), I began by mapping out the forums in *SWH* and reading the rules posted by moderators within each of the forums. This step gave me insights into the norms and expectations within and throughout the space. I began to notice teaching that reminded me of the types of pedagogy seen in traditional classrooms, and was thus the impetus for this particular analysis as an effort to make sense of these school-like practices. I then engaged in repeated observations of the most active forums as well as those with little to no activity, thus moving from the “core to the periphery” (p. 6) of *SWH*. During these observations, I read discussion forum posts and followed hyperlinks to the *Sims* fan fiction and other resources to which they pointed. My ethnographic observation was more than simply gazing at the artifacts on the site, but rather an attempt to get a feel for *SWH* as a culture. This initial systematic observation phase of data collection lasted 12 months.

In the next phase of my data collection, I identified potential key informants, whose interactions spanned different types of participation, including moderators, longtime members, authors of popular *Sims* fan fiction, prolific posters, and new

members. I followed Androutsopoulos' (2008) "practice-derived guidelines for contact with Internet actors" (p. 6) and contacted these members through the private message (PM) system on *SWH*. Eight agreed to share their thoughts with me. I conducted semi-structured virtual interviews, through email or PM, to get these insiders' perspectives. I customized interview questions to reflect my observations of each informant's interactions and artifacts within *SWH*, and maintained "repeated and prolonged" (p. 8) contact with most of them throughout the next 12 months of data collection and analysis, as they continued to confirm and inform my understanding of practices in *SWH*.

Data used for this analysis were 59 moderator-created rule posts pinned (i.e. secured, not moving from this position even as other posts were added to the forum) to the top of each forum and sub-board, including a welcome post titled Finding Your Way. To supplement these data, I analyzed tutorials and posts gathered while observing my informants' participation (i.e. posts made by my informants or appearing in their threads). Finally, this analysis was informed by virtual interview responses from my informants related to their learning in *SWH*.

Data Analysis

Gee (2011) defines discourse analysis as "the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but to do things" (p. ix). With this definition in mind, I began by reading and re-reading the 59 moderator-created rule posts to get a sense of how moderators used language "to do things" in *SWH*. These texts provided rules for what was, and was not, supposed to be posted in each forum of the site. Examining these posts helped me develop a contextualized understanding of how moderators' language-in-use regulated the space and created officially sanctioned ways of being in *SWH*. With this understanding, I began to develop an initial coding scheme for my data.

I then turned to analyzing discussion forum posts to determine whether they represented a *pedagogic* interaction. I deemed posts pedagogic if they provided instruction related to how to participate in the space or how to create *Sims* fan fiction. For example, this member post in one of Angela's story idea threads was included in the analysis:

Just one thing -- in your excerpt, there's a paragraph of description and this little bits of description. Try and get rid of the paragraph and spread it through out the action. It seems to get boring just reading about appearances. (I don't mean to sound rude, just saying. 🙄). (*SWH* member post¹², September 18, 2009)

However, the following post from the same thread was not included in the analysis as it was not pedagogic: "Woahhh... seriously, I don't know how the hell you thought of this o_o it's freakin' amazing! My brain could never hatch an idea like that" (*SWH* member post, September 19, 2009).

To further explore the nature of pedagogy in *SWH*, I analyzed pedagogic discussion forum posts through the lens of the recontextualizing rules within Bernstein's pedagogic device (1990; 1996; 2000; 2004). I looked for markers indicating an alignment between the pedagogic practices in *SWH* and Bernstein's theory. Those markers included evidence of regulative discourse and recontextualizing discourses from other locations. I took note of who was the transmitter and who was the acquirer in each pedagogic interaction. I also questioned those posts that did not contain markers aligning with Bernstein's theory to make sense of how these posts represented pedagogy other than what he theorized (See Appendix H for a data analysis sample). My analysis led me to make claims about the nature of pedagogy in *SWH* that are specifically focused on how

¹² As a consideration for the privacy of *SWH* members, many of whom are minors, I do not include any identifying information when quoting their discussion board posts.

recontextualizing rules shape pedagogic interactions in this informal, digital learning environment.

Findings

In this section, I share data that point to the dominance of regulative discourse, the recontextualization of multiple discourses into this pedagogic site, and the flexible roles of transmitters and acquirers in the space. In sharing these findings, I make a case for how each shapes pedagogic practice in *SWH*.

Dominance of Regulative Discourse

Recall that, according to Bernstein (2000), regulative discourse is the “discourse of social order” (p. 32). Regulative discourse communicates the rules of behavior, moral practice, or code of conduct in a pedagogic interaction. In his research to theorize pedagogic discourse in formal school settings, Bernstein found regulative to be the dominant discourse within which all instructional discourse is embedded. Unlike the formal educational settings Bernstein investigated, *SWH* is an online informal learning environment constructed and maintained by its primarily adolescent membership. My investigation into *SWH*'s pedagogy revealed that neither the informal nature of this learning environment, nor the young age of its participants, precluded it from exemplifying the same principle. Regulative discourse dominates many interactions in *SWH* in an attempt to norm the practices within the space.

Moderators in *SWH* have created numerous posts designed to provide members with information about site expectations. For example, in the *Welcome* sub-board, Pamela posted a message titled *Finding Your Way* as a means of introducing new members to *SWH*. Regulative discourse dominates even the welcome message, as evidenced in this excerpt:

What should be the very first thing you do at *The Hangout*? Why read the rules of course! By reading the rules, you will prove to everyone that you're an intelligent asset to this community. Often in large groups, people have a tendency to grow a little tired of the same questions being posted over and over. So please do yourself and all of us a favor, and learn the rules first! (Pamela, *SWH* post, January 1, 2010)

As a pedagogic interaction, this welcome message is a new member's first glimpse into the dominance of regulative discourse and the importance of following the rules of the space. In addition to providing directions for how to be "an intelligent asset," the message continues by providing an overview of the various sub-boards in *SWH* and offering instructions for how to participate:

Not everyone on *The Hangout* writes *Sims 2* and *Sims 3* stories, because we have an eclectic group of members who enjoy a varying arrange of artistic activities. If you're one of those people who love writing, but enjoy writing your own, NON-SIM short stories, poems, and songs, then the *Writers Lounge* is just the place for you. Feel free to post your Non-*Sim* literature there, and don't hesitate to start a *Coming Soon* thread to advertise your story. (Pamela, *SWH* post, January 1, 2010)

Even in providing instruction for where to post non-*Sims* writing, Pamela emphasizes what type of writing belongs in the *Writers Lounge* by capitalizing "NON-SIM." In this way, her pedagogical communication hints at the community's regulation about posting messages in their appropriate sub-board.

Regulative discourse communicating social norms is often made much more explicit. The site rules, for example, provide expectations about such concerns as respect, advertising, and posting in the correct sub-forum. They also detail the following consequences for breaking rules: "**First offense:** Warning PM from staff. **Second offense:** Suspension of variable length, dependent on offense. **Third offense:** Permanent ban" (emphasis in original; *SWH* moderator post, August 12, 2005). In addition to these rules and consequences, nearly all of the sub-boards within *SWH* contain moderator-created norming texts posted at the top. These posts make explicit statements designed to

norm behavior within that space. For example, the post at the top of the *Help and FAQ* forum contained a bulleted list of “what does not belong in the *Help and FAQ* board” (*SWH* moderator post, January 1, 2010). Similarly, in a post titled, “*Where can I find...? Board Rules,*” the moderator distinguishes what does belong in this forum (“Any questions asking where to find custom content for *The Sims 2*”) and what does not belong (“Any questions asking where to find the following: photo-editing software, fonts, brushes, hacks and cheats, anything else that does not count as custom content”) (*SWH* moderator post, April 18, 2006). No sub-board was immune to such regulation, which even extended to the *Chit Chat* area of the space. One moderator-created norming text in this area included this regulatory statement: “No Homework-Help threads due to the possibility of cheating. Any threads that ask for [homework] help will be locked and/or deleted” (*SWH* moderator post, August 12, 2005). Such posts exemplify Bernstein’s regulative discourse as they explicitly regulate the social order by dictating expectations for the content to be posted within each area of *SWH*.

My analysis revealed numerous examples of pedagogic communication in which the regulative and instructional discourses are inextricably interwoven. For example, this how-to post is both instructional (teaching how to modify a post) and regulative (warning that double-posting is against the rules):

Sometimes you would like to add something new or change your original post but before going to double post aka back-to-back posting, which is against the rules, please **modify** your post. In the upper right hand corner of every post you make there will be the option to **modify** or **delete** your post. (emphasis in original; *SWH* moderator post, January 1, 2010)

In another example, a moderator teaches about “How to attract more readers” for one’s *Sims* fan fiction. The post offers detailed instructions about attractively creating a story thread, including, “Put the title of your Story as the thread subject - Avoid titling it something like ‘New story’ or ‘Part 4 out!’ It doesn’t stand out, isn’t specific enough and

most people would probably skip over it” (*SWH* moderator post, August 25, 2006). This same post ends with a regulatory reminder, “**KEEP ALL CHAPTER ANNOUNCEMENTS OF THE SAME SERIES IN THE SAME THREAD!**” (emphasis in original). As in this example, moderators often use text formatting, such as **bold** and/or ALL CAPS, in their pedagogical posts as a means of emphasizing the rules or social norms of the space. Thus, regulative discourse in an online space like *SWH* takes shape via not only the language but also the presentation of that language through formatting.

One might wonder whether all of this regulation is necessary when *SWH* is just a bunch of teenagers talking about *The Sims*. However, as is the case in formal educational settings, my analysis reveals the dominance of the regulative discourse, even in this virtual space of adolescents who gather around a shared interest in a video game literacy practice. There are far more regulations about behavior in these spaces than is often made explicit in a college syllabus, for example, contrary to misperceptions of online communities as exemplifying an organic, everyone-gets-along attitude.

Recontextualizing Other Discourses

According to Bernstein (2000), within the pedagogic device, the recontextualizing rules explain the process of circulating and organizing knowledge for transmission and acquisition. These rules account for how knowledge is selectively taken from its original site and relocated into a pedagogic site for transmission. In *SWH*, a variety of other discourses are relocated and reorganized into pedagogic discourse constituting the what and how of *Sims* fan fiction knowledge and practice. Using Bernstein’s recontextualizing rules principle as a lens through which I viewed data made visible the ways community contests and activities, critiques, and reader feedback all relocated discourses from other sites as pedagogic discourse in *SWH*.

Contests represent one means for establishing the knowledge and skills valued within *SWH* and are thus a form of pedagogy. Recontextualized discourses from reality television shows are visible in *SWH* contests. For example, The Hangout's Next Top Model (HNTM) is a popular contest based upon the similarly named reality show. This contest asks participants to create Sims¹³ models using Bodyshop¹⁴ and post digitally edited photos depicting the models in various scenarios to demonstrate creativity and technical skills (See Figure 14 for a sample entry). Each round of the competition has a different theme and *SWH* members can vote for their favorite entry. The models who garner the fewest votes are eliminated and the competition continues through a variety of rounds until only one winner remains. In another example of recontextualizing reality television, moderators adapted an iteration of the Sexy Sim Competition (SSC) to reflect popular makeover television shows. The description for this competition read, "SSC: Extreme Makeover. For this challenge, you're given a Sim to makeover based on certain criteria" (*SWH* moderator post, January 1, 2010). Through the lens of the pedagogic device, contests are viewed as a form of pedagogy in which reality television competition discourses are recontextualized as pedagogic discourse.

¹³ I use the italicized *Sims* when referring to the game(s), and I use Sims when referring to the characters (or avatars) inhabiting the game.

¹⁴ A software tool used to create Sims that is separate from the video game, but was included on *The Sims 2* DVD.



Figure 14. HNTM contest submission. Pamela submitted this entry in a round that asked contestants to style their Sims models after an iconic actor/actress of their choice.

Posted community activities are another example of pedagogic interaction in *SWH*, providing members with the opportunity to develop writing skills and demonstrate creativity. In one example, transmitters recontextualized book-based discourse into the pedagogic discourse of *SWH*. The story-writing activity, called *To Be Continued...*, was billed as similar to the popular *Choose Your Own Adventure* children's books. The activity asked writers to contribute possible plot sequences based on a story starter. *SWH* members then voted on their favorite, thereby choosing the direction the adventure would take. Another activity relocated brainstorming discourse in a pedagogic interaction designed to help members overcome writer's block. The activity directed members to make lists of 50 things, such as sad things or scary things, and see what story ideas develop from those lists. The directions included the following recommendations,

When you are making the list, don't stop just keep going, and don't think to [*sic*] hard about it...when you get to the part where your subconscious [*sic*] takes over then you get some good things flowing...let images of whatever pop into your head. (*SWH* member post, December 17, 2005)

This same sub-board contained another writing activity that recontextualized brainstorming to help members develop their Sims fan fiction. This activity provided brainstorming prompts for expanding on a main theme of one's story. In the directions, the transmitter used an example theme of "death" and asked authors to think about, "Who, where, what, when, why, how. In your brainstorm, write down all the different causes, reasons, and people that could be involved in death, and explore further into other aspects of death, e.g. funerals and inheriting money" (*SWH* member post, December 18, 2005). When examined using a pedagogic device approach, *SWH* community activities show evidence that other discourses, such as those from books and brainstorming, are recontextualized as pedagogic discourse to transmit skills related to *Sims* fan fiction.

Critiques are another form of pedagogic discourse in *SWH*, providing writers with instruction related to the text and photos in their *Sims* fan fiction. Unlike the more informal reader responses discussed below, critique forms provide *SWH* members with categories and/or rating systems they can use to provide feedback to writers in the space. Reminiscent of peer reviews used in English classrooms, critique forms recontextualize school discourses as pedagogic discourse in *SWH*. The following was posted for use as a part of *Critique Week*, a moderator effort designed to encourage readers to provide formal feedback for Sims fan fiction:

Title and relation:

(Did it spring out at you? Does it relate to an aspect of the story?)

Cover:

(Was it eye-catching? Was it clear and precise? Was it in anyway confusing?)

Introduction:

(Was it an appropriate scene to start on? Did it hook you on to the story?)

Flow:

(Did the different screens fit together nicely? Did they read easily?)

Characters:

(Could you relate to them? Were they realistic? Did their clothes and possessions fit their personalities?)

Dialogue:

(Was it realistic? Did it sound good? Was it something you might [*sic*] say?)

Grammar:

(Where there any mistakes you could see?)

Pictures and graphics:

(Did the pictures relate to the text? Were the graphics turned up high?)

Chapter/story ending:

(Was it a suitable place to finish? Would it make you read the next part?)

Most enjoyable:

(What part really stuck with you? What did they do well?)

Ways to improve:

(What didn't they do so well? In what way could they improve? Do you have any pointers?)

(emphasis in original; *SWH* member post, September 29, 2006)

In this example, we see a critique form that prompts readers to give writers feedback about different aspects of their *Sims* fan fiction. The use of probing questions to guide the critique recontextualizes similar prompts given by teachers to guide their students in conducting peer reviews.

Finally, reader responses to *Sims* fan fiction are another form of pedagogic interaction in *SWH*. In informal comments posted in story threads, readers react to posted stories by offering praise, evaluative statements, and suggestions for improvement. These comments to authors thus become a means of providing instruction in the space. See, for example, this comment on one of Eve's stories: "I liked it Eve, the dancing and the kiss in the rain was brilliant! Your Sim guys are really hot! I thought maybe some more description could have been added" (*SWH* member post, January 31, 2006). This response exemplifies how praise, evaluation, and suggestions are woven into reader responses to create informal pedagogy in *SWH*. In addition to pedagogy, this examples contains discourse that recontextualizes fan behaviors into what is referred to as a *fangirl* comment: "Your Sim guys are really hot!" According to Pamela, a moderator informant:

"Fan girl" comments, would be comments that don't particularly serve a great purpose. They're usually like "OMG boy A was so hot. This whole series is super amazing. And hot! Like omg!" They're usually very childish and bias in the sense that even if the story is not very well written, they'll squeal over the creator just because they're friends or if it's of a certain, often stereotypical genre. (personal communication, March 20, 2010)

In Pamela's opinion, the recontextualization of fan discourse into *SWH* reader responses is not pedagogic, since such comments "don't particularly serve a great purpose."

However, fangirl comments occurred so often in reader responses that I turned to my other informants to understand their value. Eastwood had this to say about fangirl comments: "The gushing 'omg I love your story' is a bit like, well okay but what was good about it?...That being said, even the briefest and vaguest of comments are still better than no comments at all" (personal communication, March 26, 2010). Similarly Eleanor told me,

Receiving "fangirl" comments isn't really that bad. It's a bit repetitive and sometimes you want something a little more than what they have to say, but at the same time it's nice having some people who consistently leave nice reviews. It's also nice knowing that someone is reading your story. (personal communication, March 23, 2010)

Whereas a moderator saw the recontextualization of fan discourse as anti-example of pedagogy and did not promote it as an official discourse, *SWH* writers had appreciation for and garnered motivation from fan girl comments. (For more discussion of fangirl behavior in *SWH*, see Lammers, forthcoming).

Together these examples of contests, community activities, critiques, and reader responses illustrate that *SWH* pedagogy is a product of recontextualizing discourses from a variety of sources. To construct and transmit the official knowledge of *Sims* fan fiction, *SWH* recontextualizes discourses from media genres, schools, and fan practices.

Flexible Roles of Transmitters and Acquirers

In articulating the pedagogic relationship, Bernstein (2004) described it as a hierarchical relationship between the teachers he called transmitters and the students he referred to as acquirers. According to Bernstein, the power relations could be more or less explicit, depending on the context. In an explicit hierarchy, these power relations are

very clear, whereas in an implicit hierarchy, “the teacher acts directly on the context of acquisition but indirectly on the acquirer” (p. 199). In either case, Bernstein’s model represented transmitter and acquirer roles as fixed (i.e. teachers transmit the knowledge and students acquire it). However, my analysis revealed that in *SWH* such roles are more flexible. As I will demonstrate below, an *SWH* member can at one time act as an acquirer and at another fill the role of transmitter. Thus, using Bernstein’s pedagogic device as a lens made visible ways *SWH* rejects the rigidity of such roles and creates a space in which members can both acquire and transmit knowledge. The fluidity of these relationships is seen in pedagogic communication in *SWH*, including in regulative discourse, critiques, and posts in *Sims* fan fiction story threads.

As noted earlier, Bernstein (2000) theorized pedagogic discourse as comprised of instructional discourse embedded within a dominant regulative discourse. While moderators transmit much of the pedagogic communication dominated by regulative discourse within *SWH*, at times members regulate each other. For example, in a thread for one of her *Sims* fan fictions, one member posted a message that read, “-time may change me, but i [sic] can’t change time” (*SWH* post, August 29, 2009). This post did not offer a response to Angela’s story, as this song quote had nothing to do with the storyline. In response, Angela posted, “That's not relative at all. I don't want this thread to get locked for being off-topic, so please don't post that again! 🙄” (August 31, 2009). In this way, Angela takes up a transmitter role in her story thread, transmitting pedagogic discourse to another member. Also relevant to this discussion of the flexibility of roles is an understanding of how a member becomes a moderator in *SWH*. In typical formal school pedagogic interactions, transmitters must acquire the knowledge and skills of their content area before taking on the role of transmitter, as evidenced by the subject-area

knowledge tests that teachers pass for certification, for example. However, in *SWH*, transmitters do not need to demonstrate evidence of having acquired certain knowledge or skills in creating *Sims* fan fiction before they assume the role of transmitter. For example, one of my moderator informants, Pamela, did not post *Sims* fan fiction in *SWH* either before or during her tenure as a moderator. When I asked her about how she became Senior Staff in the space, Pamela explained: “I was really the only active Hangout Helper left...because of my leadership, Jen (old staff) entrusted me with Senior Staff and took her leave” (personal communication, February 19, 2010). In other words, Pamela was given the necessary permissions to take on the responsibility of Senior Staff because she had demonstrated “leadership” in the space, not because she had demonstrated expertise as a *Sims* fan fiction writer.

Recall that earlier I discussed critiques as a form of pedagogic interaction in *SWH*. Critiques also illustrate the flexible nature of transmitter and acquirer roles in this space because they allow members to take up the role of teacher as they give feedback to fellow *SWH* members. Below is a completed critique received by one of my informants, Missy, on a *Sims* fan fiction chapter she posted on *SWH*:

Name of Story: *Baby Blue: Chapter 1*

Introduction: 8/10

I loved the scenes and the way you started it off. I was instantly hooked.

Body: 9/10

I love this story. I kept me thinking and wanting to know more. The part where Lisa overheard the doctor really got me wondering. Hopefully you let us know in a future chapter who the doctor was talking to.

Conclusion/End of chapter 9/10

I loved the ending! Especially the ninja! That was very unique and very creative. It left me with a lot of questions and kept me wanting to read more. I also loved how you had previews for the next chapter, much like you see on tv [*sic*]. Very creative ;]

Likes: As I said before, I like the previews you had at the end of the chapter. I also loved how the nurse was talking about the Grayford's and then Lisa's law firm is also working with them.

Dislikes: Can't think of any at the moment [*sic*].

Graphics: 9/10

You have an awesome graphics card and the scenes are awesome. However, some of them could use some more props.

Grammar: 9/10

There were a few small errors I picked up on, but nothing too major.

Rating from reviewer (on the *Exchange*): 5/5

Rating out of ten: 9/10

Pointers for improvement: As I said, some scenes could use more props, but other than that I can't think of anything you really needed to improve on. (emphasis in original; *SWH* member post, September 30, 2006)

Note that this member uses a critique form with rating scales to provide both quantitative and qualitative feedback to Missy. She makes specific references back to the text, especially when offering praise. In this way, the member acts as a transmitter while Missy receives the evaluative feedback and is thus positioned as an acquirer.

As noted above, reader responses are a form of pedagogic communication in *SWH*. Because of the nature of the discussion board format of *SWH*, any member can post feedback to a *Sims* fan fiction story thread. Whereas in one interaction a member can be the transmitter in a reader response, that same member can, in another interaction be on the receiving end, acquiring knowledge. Angela's participation in *SWH* illustrates this flexibility of roles. In the following example, she takes on the role of transmitter, in a reader response she posted on another member's *Sims* fan fiction:

Ah, I hate to have to say it, but I think you got a lot of these ideas from *Twilight*. That's fine as long as you develop the ideas into your own story. ...I'd also have to say that your writing could easily be improved simply by reading some other stories on this site, or you can get help from *The Vault* [an *SWH* sub-forum containing tutorials and writing ideas]. It wasn't too bad, but there's certainly room for improvement. If you need any help with future chapter, feel free to PM [private message]. (Angela *SWH* post, November 18, 2009)

Angela offers an instructional suggestion, pointing the author to resources available in *SWH*, and she also offers future assistance as a transmitter. However, later, in her own story's thread, Angela takes on the role of acquirer, as seen in this exchange in her *Sims* fan fiction thread:

Just one thing -- in your excerpt, there's a paragraph of description and this little bits of description. Try and get rid of the paragraph and spread it through out the action. It seems to get boring just reading about appearances. (I don't mean to sound rude, just saying. 🙄) (*SWH* member post, September 18, 2009)

To which Angela responded,

Yeah, I get what you mean with the description. I was writing it really fast just to get something down before I completely forgot how I wanted the prologue to go. I'll work on that. (: And thank you so much! (*SWH* post, September 19, 2009)

These posts point to the flexibility of Angela's roles in *SWH*. As a learning environment, *SWH* allows her to take up the role of transmitter in some pedagogic interactions and acquirer in others.

Unlike the pedagogic relationship in most formal learning environments, transmitter and acquirer roles in *SWH* are flexible. The *Sims* fan fiction story threads are a space where members engage in pedagogic practices that allow them to take up transmitter roles through reader responses and critiques. These same members can also acquire knowledge in the space.

Discussion

My initial inquiries into *SWH* led me to seek out a way to theorize moderators' practices related to maintaining order in the space (Lammers, forthcoming). I wondered what insights could be garnered if such policing of the discussion forums was examined as pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 2000). Thus, in this analysis, I pursued questions exploring the nature of pedagogy in *SWH* as a means to understand how knowledge is communicated (transmitted) to *SWH* members (the acquirers). To answer these questions, I viewed discussion forum interactions, *SWH* activities, and moderator-created norming texts through the lens of the pedagogic device, paying particular attention to the recontextualizing rules. My efforts revealed insights about how Bernstein's model does

and does not account for all the pedagogic practices visible in an online, informal learning environment like *SWH*. My findings centered on (a) the dominance of regulative discourse, (b) that discourses from many different sites are recontextualized as pedagogy, and (c) the flexibility of roles between transmitters and acquirers in *SWH*.

Like the formal school environments upon which Bernstein developed his model, pedagogic interactions in *SWH* embedded instructional discourse within a more dominant regulative discourse. Moderators posted numerous norming texts and reminders about the rules within discussion threads. Such regulative discourse was designed to maintain social order within the space. Yet, despite moderators' best efforts to norm the practices by encouraging members to read the rules, many did not. For example, one of my informants had this to say: "I should have read the rules when I first came here. I sort of picked up the rules as I read responses from the mods [moderators]" (Naomi, personal communication, April 15, 2010). While other research has informed our understanding of *learning* in online affinity spaces (Black, 2008; Fields & Kafai, 2009; Gee, 2004; 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2010; Ito, et al., 2010), little attention has been paid to how these spaces regulate and norm behavior. *SWH* is a site of more than 12,000 members from all over the world who gather virtually to participate in the online forums. Online fan spaces create a culture of their own and must communicate the norms and expectations to members using the technology available. Perhaps all of this regulative discourse is necessary for such a large, geographically dispersed, virtual group to function. In addition, Naomi's comment reveals that at least some members do not read the rules, suggesting there is a need for regulative discourse in official places, such as the moderator-created norming texts, and in informal reminders throughout the forums. Future inquiries into pedagogic discourse could compare between *SWH* and other gaming-related affinity spaces to explore what factors influence the amount and nature of

regulative discourse in these sites. For example, is the age or gender of the participants a relevant factor shaping the amount and nature of regulative discourse?

The official knowledge of *SWH* is relayed through recontextualized discourses from multiple sites, including media genres, schools, and fan practices. Contests, for example, evidenced reality television discourses recontextualized as pedagogic practice to transmit *Sims* fan fiction knowledge. Not only does formal schooling pedagogy often dismiss pop culture as a means for transmitting knowledge (Marsh & Millard, 2000) schools often shy away from contests as a form of pedagogic discourse because they fly in the face of the mentality that “everybody is a winner,” which is so often encouraged in school. Through recontextualizing discourses from multiple sites, *SWH* broadens what counts as legitimate *Sims* fan fiction pedagogy. By demonstrating how multiple discourses shape acceptable writing instruction in an online learning environment, this finding can inform practice with an eye toward how classroom literacy instruction might similarly be shaped. What would it look like for classrooms to broaden what counts as legitimate English pedagogy? Beyond including media texts in the classroom, what if the discourses of media genres were taken up as English pedagogy? We need more models in the literature for how this might look in actual classrooms. Also, continued research into pedagogic discourse in online affinity spaces might reveal issues of power and control related to these recontextualized discourses. For example, who votes in the contests, and how does that shape what is considered legitimate and valued knowledge and practice?

Finally, my analysis demonstrates the flexibility of transmitter and acquirer roles in *SWH*. This flexibility allows the official knowledge to be constructed by multiple voices. While unlike the inflexibility of these roles in the formal school settings studied by Bernstein, this finding does align with the features of an affinity space articulated by

Gee (2004), namely that these spaces value distributed knowledge and expertise and that leadership is porous. Though I was able to illustrate the ways in which a few of my informants participated as both transmitters and acquirers, I do not have a sense how many or how often other *SWH* members take up multiple roles. Perhaps only a relative few members both transmit and acquire knowledge. This would be in line with what Juran (1954) referred to as the Pareto principle, or the 80/20 rule. This principle states that often in organizations a “vital few” participants have a much greater effect than the “trivial many” in the space. To gain a more complete understanding of the flexibility of roles in online learning environments such as *SWH*, additional research is needed to determine who actually takes up the available roles in these spaces. Such research might also explore what conditions affect who participates in what ways in online learning environments.

As a model of pedagogic interactions, Bernstein’s pedagogic device (2000) articulates the distributive, recontextualizing, and evaluative rules as a tidy structure for making sense of what in reality was not tidy in *SWH*. Participants in online affinity spaces, such as *SWH*, are a constantly changing group of people. Similarly, the pedagogy in these spaces continually changes. Bernstein’s model was useful for focusing my attention on the dominance of regulative discourse, the types of recontextualized discourses, and the flexibility of transmitter and acquirer roles. Continued research is needed to more fully explore how the distributive and evaluative rules align (or not) with pedagogy in online affinity spaces.

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CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

I designed this dissertation study to explore the nature of literacies and learning in a gaming-related online affinity space, *The Sims Writers Hangout (SWH)*. I strove to understand how this fan-created discussion forum supported members as they created and shared *Sims* fan fiction. My study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How is *SWH*, an online affinity space, organized to create a collaborative learning environment?
 - a. How does this space create and promote high standards for literacy learning?
 - b. How does participation in this space shape the creation of participants' *Sims* fan fiction?
2. What is the nature of the multimodal literacies recruited by this space?

To answer these questions I conducted a two-year discourse-centered online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) that involved systematic observation and virtual interactions with key informants. To analyze the data generated by my ethnography, I began by using Gee's (2004) affinity space theory as a lens through which I viewed the organization of *SWH*. I then applied the New London Group's (1996) Designs of Meaning (DoM) theory to make sense of the literacies members recruit to participate in the space. Lastly, I analyzed discussion forum data using Bernstein's pedagogic device concept (1990; 1996; 2000; 2004) to develop an understanding of the pedagogy of *SWH*.

In this final chapter, I have the following goals: (a) to review the findings presented in each of the three previous manuscripts to illustrate how they individually and collectively represent answers to my research questions; (b) to articulate the

implications these findings have for theory, practice, and future research; and (c) to reflect on what I learned from conducting this study.

Review of Findings

In this section, I summarize the findings of my research. These findings center on three main areas related to my study of *SWH*: tensions, literacies, and pedagogy. I conclude by articulating how my findings collectively answer my research questions.

Tensions within *SWH*

In Chapter 3, I focused on understanding practices that did not seem to support the “common endeavor” (Gee, 2004, p. 85) of creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction. My analysis made visible that varied use of the space was one source of tensions. Posting in *Chit Chat*, while not directly related to the common endeavor, was a popular form of “hanging out” (Ito, et al., 2010) in *SWH*. While Pamela (a moderator informant) expressed her displeasure with *SWH* members who only posted in the *Chit Chat* without contributing to the *Sims*-related activities, other informants valued this forum as a space to get to know people in ways not possible through their *Sims* fan fiction or story threads. Privileging the visual aspect of *Sims* fan fiction over the written aspect and posting fangirl comments instead of more substantive feedback on *Sims* fan fiction were other varied uses of *SWH* that caused tensions.

Moderators attempted to mitigate tensions through a variety of practices designed to maintain the order of *SWH*. They posted rules, which I called moderator-created norming texts, and reminders in an attempt to establish social order in the space. However, this also created more tensions because some members did not read the rules. As another form of maintaining order, people (members and moderators) initiated discussions to solicit input about *SWH*'s practices and activities. In addition to being a space to air tensions, these discussions encouraged members to talk about the purpose of

the site and the practices they valued. Such discussions often led to interventions, or changes to the practices or organization of *SWH*. The most extensive intervention I observed during my study was the site revamp in fall 2009. By creating new forums for *The Sims 3* and other writing activities, this intervention addressed concerns raised in the “Is the Hangout...the Hangout?” thread. Together, the findings related to varied use of the space and efforts to maintain order in *SWH* shed light on tensions within an online affinity space. Focusing on these tensions deepens our knowledge of the complexity of practices in online affinity spaces.

Literacies of *SWH*

In Chapter 4, I viewed Angela’s *SWH*-related activities through a Design (New London Group, 1996) lens and demonstrated how she drew on Available Designs from multiple offline and virtual contexts both to create her *Sims* fan fiction and to participate in *SWH*. Angela’s Designing took place within and outside of *SWH*. Tracing her process revealed how she made Design decisions and when she collaborated with others. Angela’s *Sims* fan fiction and her *SWH* posts also exemplified The Redesigned. Her post requesting photos of *Sims* for a story, for example, was reminiscent of the Available Designs of other requests, but also uniquely her own as a result of her Design needs. Angela leveraged her participation in *SWH* to shape her *Sims* fan fiction in ways that made it a collaborative endeavor; She shared story ideas for feedback, requested the assistance of proofreaders, and tapped into the expertise of others who had specialized knowledge. Thus, my analysis illustrated the collaborative nature of literacies members engage in to participate in *SWH*.

Pedagogy of *SWH*

In Chapter 5, I explored the nature of pedagogy in *SWH* using Bernstein’s (2000; 2004) pedagogic device model. Findings pointed to the dominance of regulative

discourse, the recontextualization of multiple discourses as pedagogy, and the flexible roles of transmitters and acquirers. Numerous moderator-created norming texts contributed to the dominance of regulative discourse by repeating site expectations at the top of most sub-forums. Regulative discourse was visible not only in the language within posts, but also in formatting. Bernstein's recontextualizing rules principle also made visible the ways community contests and activities, critiques, and reader feedback all relocated discourses from other sites as pedagogic discourse in *SWH*. Finally, my analysis uncovered pedagogic interactions illustrating the flexibility of transmitter and acquirer roles. For example, *Sims* fan fiction story threads were a space where members took up transmitter roles by posting reader responses and critiques. In these ways, my analysis demonstrated how *SWH* pedagogy aligned with and challenged Bernstein's model of the pedagogic device.

Tying it all Together

Collectively, the three analyses shed light on how *SWH* was organized to create a collaborative learning environment. This environment was explicitly constructed through certain forums and practices. The *Classified* sub-forum, for example, connected *Sims* fan fiction creators with proofreaders and with members who filled requests for custom content. Contests and other community activities engaged participants in ways that allowed them to work together and learn from each other. Pedagogic interactions also offered explicit instructional and regulative discourse that helped to create the official knowledge and social order of this learning environment. Additionally, collaborative learning was fostered in implicit ways. Available Designs of existing *Sims* fan fiction and discussion posts offered models for the conventions of the space. The flexibility allowing members to take up roles as transmitters and acquirers also contributed to the learning environment of the space. *SWH* promoted high standards for literacy learning

through a variety of pedagogic activities, such as contests, critiques, and reader responses. These activities were opportunities for members to give structured and unstructured feedback to shape *Sims* fan fiction. Eve's experiences in *SWH*, for example, shaped her *Sims* creations by giving her opportunities to follow a digital media creation trajectory producing *Sims* music videos, machinima, and digital image editing tutorials. Finally, this study revealed the nature of literacies recruited by *SWH* to be collaborative, a part of a Design process, and oftentimes pedagogic. I now move to a discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of these findings.

Implications

My exploration of literacies and learning in and around *SWH* suggests practical implications for literacy learning. It also has theoretical implications related to using theories as analytic tools and expanding existing theories to account for the practices in online affinity spaces. In this section, I articulate those implications and conclude by providing recommendations for future research.

Practical Implications

Literacy instruction in today's classrooms happens in a climate impacted by numerous calls for standardization (e.g. No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and the Common Core Standards) and warnings that American students are not prepared to compete in the global marketplace. Amidst these demands, research recommendations on the effectiveness of student-centered approaches to literacy instruction can get pushed to the margins. Though I am not advocating that schools abandon current literacy instructional methods altogether and replace them with online affinity space models, I do believe lessons learned from these spaces have the potential to create student-centered, experiential, relevant, and engaging literacy learning opportunities for today's students.

In online affinity spaces such as *SWH*, young people are encouraged to participate in ways that match their skills and interests. They tap into a distributed knowledge network, leveraging the expert knowledge of others to shape their creations. These features of an affinity space are unlike experiences available in the standardized mode of instruction often seen in today's literacy classrooms (Black, 2008; Gee, 2004). I believe educators can draw on *SWH* as a model for encouraging student-centered collaboration in the classroom. What if writers' workshops were facilitated through an online discussion board modeled after *SWH* with student-created forums, tutorials, and resources in which students served as a distributed network of collaborators and readers? Such an environment would allow students to develop areas of literacy expertise and work together to Design in ways that honor intensive knowledge, opening up possibilities for increased student engagement and motivation. In classroom settings where technology access is a concern, I believe it is still possible to allow students to co-construct the environment similar to the ways members did with forums in *SWH*. Thus, learning becomes more student-centered. In addition, the variety of literacies recruited for participation in *SWH* offers models for moving beyond writing instruction focused on teaching standardized formats, such as the 5-paragraph essay. To better prepare students to participate in a networked, global society, literacy instruction should provide opportunities for engaging in multimodal and digital writing spaces and formats.

SWH allowed participants to flexibly take up transmitter and acquirer roles throughout the forums. Due to this flexibility, the official knowledge of the space was co-constructed by the members and moderators. This is unlike transmission models of literacy instruction that position the teacher as the expert. I believe educators and policy makers should move away from the extreme focus on standardized instruction and share some of the control over the official knowledge with students. Drawing on the

experiences available to young people in online affinity spaces, literacy classrooms could be reconceptualized as spaces where transmitter and acquirer roles are flexible and students have meaningful opportunities to construct what it means to be a reader and a writer. To do so would involve opening up the curriculum to encourage students to bring their interests and expertise into the classroom.

Theoretical Implications

My dissertation work also has theoretical implications related to using theories as analytic tools and to expanding these theories to account for the literacies and practices uncovered in *SWH*. In what follows, I share insights into the effectiveness of the DoM framework (New London Group, 1996) and Bernstein's pedagogic device (1990; 1996; 2000; 2004) as conceptual tools for analyzing data. I also discuss ways my analyses call for an expansion of Gee's (2004) affinity space theory and Bernstein's (2000) pedagogic discourse theory.

Theories as analytic tools. My study informs our understanding of the New London Group's (1996) DoM theory and its application as an analytic tool for future research. This tool made visible that creating *Sims* fan fiction exemplified a Design process involving the following elements: Available Designs, Designing, and The Redesigned. As I categorized Angela's literacies according to my understanding of these elements, the tool shed light on the collaborative nature of the literacies Angela recruited to create and share *Sims* fan fictions in this context. Thus, my study adds to previous research (including Black, 2005; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003) that used the New London Group's (1996) theory and extends this work by applying the theory as an analytic tool in a new way. I agree with the authors when they say their Design model of discourse "fits well with the social life and social subjects in fast-changing and culturally diverse societies" (p. 74). The DoM framework was flexible enough to be applied to

multimodal literacies in an online setting, yet clearly defined enough for making sense of semiotic activities in *SWH*.

Using Bernstein's model to view the rules and other norming practices uncovered in Chapter 3's analysis changed my perspective. During the analysis presented in Chapter 5, I went from seeing these practices as policing to seeing them as pedagogic discourse. This was an important shift in my interpretation of moderator-created norming texts because it forced me to evaluate these posts for their regulative *and* instructional content. In this way, Bernstein's model was helpful.

Over his 40-year career, Bernstein published a series of books, talks, and papers in an effort to develop his theory of pedagogic discourse. Though he articulated the pedagogic device as a set of interconnected rules (the distributive rules, recontextualizing rules, and evaluative rules), Bernstein himself acknowledged the theory was a work-in-progress with each individual paper being a "productive imperfection...[that generated]...conceptual tension...[providing] the potential for development" (2000, p. 211). Even in his final book on the topic (Bernstein, 2000), Bernstein's pedagogic device model remained abstract and multi-layered, making it more challenging to work with as an analytic tool. As I struggled with how to apply the theory to the discourse I observed in *SWH*, I found it helpful to see how others had used various components of the model to describe school-based ICT pedagogy (Marsh, 2007; Robertson, 2007; Tyler, 2001) and informal literacies (Moss, 2000; Williams, 1999). An important lesson I gleaned from these studies was that it was acceptable, and maybe even preferable, to take up only one set of the pedagogic device's rules to examine a pedagogic site. It was at this point in my data analysis process that I narrowed my focus to exploring how the recontextualizing rules helped me to understand the nature of pedagogy in *SWH*.

Expanding theories. In Chapter 3, my analysis revealed ways Gee's (2004) affinity space theory was insufficient to describe and make sense of all the tensions in *SWH*, thus providing an opportunity for expanding our understanding of affinity spaces. For example, I found the affinity space theory did not help me to make sense of *Chit Chat*, which comprised more than half of all posts in *SWH*. None of Gee's (2004) elements of an affinity space address such socializing disconnected from the common endeavor of the space. *Chit Chat* posts, as socializing, were a form of "hanging out" (Ito, et al., 2010) in which young people interacted in seemingly off-topic conversations. The availability of such conversations motivated members to visit *SWH* and engage in the forums. I believe *Chit Chat* appealed to the friendship-driven genres of participation (Ito, et al., 2010) of *SWH* members and added depth to their experiences within the site. To understand these spaces more completely, I propose drawing from the work of Ito et al to account for the important role socializing plays in motivating people to participate in online fan sites. While the "common endeavor" (Gee, 2004) of creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction still served as a primary and/or initial draw to the space, members clearly valued *The Sims Writers' Hangout* as a space for "hanging out" (Ito, et al., 2010). As such, in an effort to strengthen our understanding of online affinity spaces, we need to recognize the multiple affinities bringing members to these spaces, blurring boundaries between friendship- and interest-driven genres of participation.

It is important to note that since the time I began this dissertation, Gee and Hayes put forth a revised theory of affinity spaces they now call *passionate affinity groups* (2010). Though much of the features are similar, there is now an emphasis on how the common interest bringing people to these spaces is a "passion-fueled endeavor" (p. 107). Gee and Hayes briefly acknowledge that a person's participation in a passionate affinity group may not always be singularly focused on the shared passion, though they suggest

such deviation is in service to “ensuring the survival and flourishing of the passion and the passionate affinity group” (p. 107). In this new iteration of the theory, I see a connection with my own findings as well as a need for further research to continue to theorize what motivates people to participate in different ways in spaces like *SWH*.

Another implication related to a need for expanding existing theories to account for practices seen in *SWH* comes from the analysis presented in Chapter 5. My findings pointed to an opportunity for expanding Bernstein’s pedagogic discourse theory to account for differences between formal schooling environments and the online, informal learning environments where pedagogy also occurs. Specifically, I noted that transmitter and acquirer roles in *SWH* were flexible, allowing the official knowledge of the space to be constructed by multiple voices. Bernstein (2000) conceptualized the *pedagogic recontextualizing field* (PRF) as being comprised of teachers, staff developers, textbook and curriculum authors, and teacher educators who have an effect on pedagogic discourse in a given classroom. He made no mention of students in the PRF, indicating they do not have a role in creating pedagogic discourse in formal schooling environments. I would argue the members of *SWH* did have a role in the PRF of their online learning environment as the flexibility of the transmitter and acquirer roles allowed them to actively participate in the pedagogic discourse. Continued research into the role participants in online affinity spaces play in the PRF could lead to an expansion of Bernstein’s model to account for the differences seen in these learning environments.

Recommendations for Future Research

As I consider next steps as a result of my study, I see a need for educational researchers to expand our knowledge as we seek answers to four key questions:

1. What learning trajectories do adolescents take as they participate in and around online environments?

2. What connections, if any, do adolescents see between their online and in-school literacy practices?
3. What connections, if any, do secondary educators see between adolescents' online and in-school literacy practices?
4. How might lessons learned from online environments shape adolescent literacy instruction to prepare students for 21st century social futures?

In my study, I focused on understanding the culture of *SWH* as a whole. Though eight participants informed my understanding, it was beyond the scope of this research to examine their individual learning trajectories in any great detail. I believe there is more to learn about the individual experiences of adolescents in online spaces, especially related to questions about what conditions affect how they participate and where their learning leads, both within and beyond the space. While my study contributes to our knowledge about the numerous disconnects between learning in schools and learning in online affinity spaces (Black, 2008; Gee, 2004; 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2010; Lam, 2000), I see a need to more closely examine the *connections* between online and in-school literacies and learning, from the adolescents' and the teachers' perspectives.

As I look ahead to my emerging research agenda and continued work as a teacher educator, I see opportunities for taking the lessons learned in this study and beginning to apply them to shape classroom literacy instruction. I acknowledge that barriers, including standardization mandates and technology access issues, would make it difficult to put my earlier recommendations into practice in many of today's classrooms. In my future research, I envision working with individual teachers in formative design projects (Reinking & Bradley, 2008) to implement elements of affinity spaces into their adolescent literacy instruction. This work has the potential to provide models for how

barriers were overcome and to document the successes, challenges, and learning in the process.

Reflections

As I reflect back on my experience of conducting this dissertation research, I am struck by how much I learned not only about my intended foci of literacies and learning, but also about conducting research. In this final section, I present my reflections about these areas connecting them with ideas about how they will impact my future research and teaching.

Conducting Virtual Ethnography

I conducted my dissertation study in an online space because my interests and experiences with adolescent literacies led me to want to make sense of where adolescents spend increasing amounts of time creating and sharing content (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). To support their affinities, adolescents are tapping into a variety of sites available on the Internet. Just as the web connects adolescents to literacies, learning, people, and ideas that they would not otherwise have access to without the Internet, I was similarly granted access to a research site and informants via the Internet. In this way, the virtual nature of my research context was a benefit. However, conducting a virtual ethnography presented its own challenges related to data collection and ethical considerations. I turn now to my reflections to articulating those two challenges.

Data collection. I began my research project with a focus on studying the culture of *SWH*. However, in order to develop a more complete understanding of how participants engaged in that space, I needed to expand the boundaries of my field site to include other interconnected websites where *Sims* fan fiction and custom content were hosted. I had to follow the inquiry where my informants' practices led me. Remaining

flexible and following the trail of connections wherever they may lead is an important element in conducting virtual ethnographies (Hine, 2009; Leander & McKim, 2003). It requires a virtual ethnographer to remain open. While such openness was not a challenge to my sensibilities as a researcher, it was a challenge with respect to data management. I chose to manage my data electronically, using Microsoft® Word documents. I created multimodal field notes with screenshots, downloaded discussion forum posts, and hyperlinks documenting how I followed my informants' activities. Using file names, tags, and folders, I organized all of these documents in a way that made them searchable on my laptop. In future virtual ethnographic research, I would like to use a qualitative analysis software package, such as HyperRESEARCH™ to explore whether data management could be more efficient.

Another data collection challenge I had related to maintaining contact with informants. As noted in Chapter 2, when I first approached Pamela to introduce myself and my project, I sent her a message using *SWH*'s private message (PM) system. After she gave her consent to participate, I sent her the first set of virtual interview questions via the email address she provided. Weeks passed without any reply. I sent a follow-up email inquiring about whether she was still willing to share her insights. That email went unanswered. I worried about what it meant to conduct my dissertation research relying on informants with whom I had no face-to-face relationship. When I eventually sent Pamela another PM to ask whether she was still interested in the project, she admitted to not checking her email since she entered her information on the project's Google site giving her consent (nearly six weeks had passed). From then on, I only communicated with Pamela via PM. This exchange serves as a reminder to use all available technology, not only for capturing data as Androutopoulos (2008) recommends, but also for maintaining contact with informants in virtual ethnographies.

Ethical considerations. Conducting a virtual ethnographic study of *SWH* also posed challenges related to ethics. I never questioned the need to obtain informed consent from my key informants and planned from the beginning to assign them pseudonyms. I felt that pseudonyms were an important means for protecting the identity of my informants, even though they already had a degree of anonymity because of their *SWH* usernames. A challenge to this plan arose when I asked my informants to choose pseudonyms and one had an issue with this request. Eve initially preferred that I use her real name saying, “all my online friends/fans know me by that name” (personal communication, April 25, 2010). This brought up an interesting question for me especially given that *SWH*, as with other online content sharing spaces, had an ethic of giving credit. There were posts to remind *Sims* fan fiction writers to credit the sources of the custom content they used to create their images, for example. In addition, many writers acknowledged the contributions of other members, including proofreaders. I began to wonder whether hiding the identity of my informants behind a pseudonym took away their credit for authorship. Ultimately, in accordance with requirements of the Institutional Review Board, and to remain consistent (one of my informants was a minor whose identity I believed needed to be protected by a pseudonym), I chose to use the pseudonym Eve reluctantly provided.

In another ethical consideration, I wondered about whether or not to publish the titles of my informants’ *Sims* fan fiction texts. I looked to the expertise of other Internet researchers (Black, 2008; Elm, 2009; Ess & Association of Internet Researchers, 2002) for guidance on navigating this challenge. Charles Ess and the Association of Internet Researchers (2002) published a report providing a series of questions for online researchers to ask regarding ethics. The report does not provide a strict set of ethics rules, but rather stresses the contextual considerations for privacy that Internet users

should expect: “the greater the acknowledged publicity of the venue, the less obligation there may be to protect individual privacy [and] confidentiality” (p. 5). In disseminating her research, Rebecca Black (2008) made the decision to change the titles of her informants’ fan fiction texts as a consideration for such titles being “highly searchable” (p. 23). Unlike the very public nature of her research site, *SWH* was a *semi-public environment* (Elm, 2009) that required membership but was essentially open to all who submitted a registration request. I also considered that my informants’ identity was already protected beneath the usernames and online avatars they themselves created on *SWH* and in the sites where they hosted their *Sims* fan fiction (i.e. the *Exchange*). I tested the *searchability* of my informants’ *Sims* fan fiction titles and was unable to locate any of them on the first 10 pages of results in a Google search. A final consideration in my decision was a desire to share screenshots illustrating the multimodal nature of *Sims* fan fiction. Some of these images contained the story titles, and to change the titles meant I would either forfeit using these images or need to change them drastically. With all of this in mind, I chose not to change my informants’ *Sims* fan fiction titles when reporting my research.

Literacies and Learning

Elsewhere in this dissertation, I already explained my *findings* about literacies and learning as a result of my exploration of *SWH* members’ practices related to creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction, so it would be redundant to repeat them here. However, I do want to use this space to share some thoughts about literacies and learning from the perspective I now have on the back end of this project.

It strikes me as noteworthy that at the same time education, literacy education in particular, is becoming more scripted in classrooms, literacy learning is occurring in meaningful ways in spaces such as *SWH*. As they created and shared *Sims* fan fiction,

SWH members Designed sophisticated literacies that were multimodal, hybrid, intertextual, digital, entertaining, informative, and functional. They did all of this without scripted instruction or a grade. Rather, these young people pursued their interest with passionate persistence, also known as *grit* (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007; Gee & Hayes, 2010). While my project was not designed to capture observed quantitative data about the number of hours informants spent on *SWH*-related activities, I have anecdotal information indicating that some of the most popular and prolific *Sims* fan fiction writers in *SWH* spent a great number of hours working on their creations. In this way, their passionate pursuits exemplified the notion that to learn something well and gain expertise requires thousands of dedicated hours of work (Gladwell, 2008). I also believe that creating and sharing *Sims* fan fiction gave *SWH* members an opportunity to develop the learning and innovation skills, information, media, and technology skills, and life and career skills that comprise the *Framework for 21st Century Learning* (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2009).

As I continue my work as a teacher educator and literacy researcher, I want to stress to the educators within my sphere of influence that literacy learning does not have to be scripted to be effective, regardless of what policy makers and curriculum publishers may say. I want to encourage teachers to foster their students' passions, allowing flexibility in their curriculum so students can connect their own interests with class work in ways that allow them to log hours towards expertise. Finally, I want my research to continue to shed light on sites, both in- and out-of-schools, that are fostering 21st century literacy learning.

Final Thoughts

In closing, I thought it important to note that *SWH* no longer exists as I studied it. Early in 2011, Pamela stepped down as the Head Moderator and the members began yet

another discussion of the site's purpose and practices. The remaining moderators decided they wanted to move away from the focus on *The Sims* as a tool for creating stories. They redesigned the forums, moving those expressly related to *The Sims* into an area labeled *Visual Arts* and creating new spaces to share non-*Sims* writing under the heading *Writers' Lounge*. However, the site's name was still *The Sims Writers' Hangout* and no remaining member or moderator had the necessary permissions to change that behind the scenes. On January 31, 2011, the new head moderator initiated a poll to ask members how they felt about moving to a new ProBoards™ site. With 23 people submitting a vote in the week the poll was active, the decision was made to move. By mid-March, *SWH* “went dark” (see Figure 15), and the new *Writers' Hangout* site was born (see Figure 16).



Figure 15. Screenshot of *SWH* homepage on March 23, 2011. Upon creating a new *Hangout* on a different ProBoards® site, an *SWH* moderator changed this site's display by removing the banner and changing the background to black, illustrating that the space had "gone dark."



Figure 16. Screenshot of the *Writer's Hangout* banner. This banner is displayed at the top of the new site. The lack of Sims in the image reflects the moderators' desire to create a group focused on writing more broadly.

As I reflect on lessons researchers can take from the disestablishment of *SWH*, I choose to see it in a positive light, with respect to literacies and learning. I believe the move to the *Writers' Hangout* indicates that these young writers no longer needed the scaffolding provided to them by *The Sims* and they are comfortable establishing distance from the game. I also believe that this move exemplifies the learning that will be demanded of them in our 21st century society because it illustrates they are able to take lessons learned in one site and apply them in a new context. As Angela said, "*The Hangout* was serious business" (personal communication, February 20, 2010); it was a space that gave members the opportunity to pursue their passion for *Sims* fan fiction in a self-directed, meaningful way. Even in shutting down, the end of *SWH* demonstrates how adolescents were able to use a video game as a springboard for future writing and how they exhibited agency in the design of their own learning environment. Thus, in concluding my dissertation, I am hopeful about the potential online affinity spaces have to provide adolescents with meaningful opportunities for literacy learning and the potential they have as research sites to inform our understanding of literacies and learning.

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APPENDIX A

SIMS FAN FICTION EXAMPLE

Sims Fan Fiction Example

What follows are screenshots from a *Sims* fan fiction as it is meant to be viewed online. They represent the first five of 32 entries in part one of a three-part *Sims* fan fiction series. This series was created with *The Sims 2* and uploaded to the *Exchange* by one of my study informants, Eleanor.



Bloody Mary 1 - Chant My Name



Created: 03.27.2006 - Updated: 03.27.2006

.:Chapter 1:.:Chant:.

Bloody Mary 1 - Chant My Name



Created: 03.27.2006 - Updated: 03.27.2006

There was no wind on the night when four girls decided to do the fateful chant, the chant that would change the course of their lives forever. The house they were in was completely still, as if no one was inside. The house belonged to Lois Lewis, and her parents were out at a fancy party, so she'd invited three friends over for a sleepover.

Bloody Mary 1 - Chant My Name



Created: 03.27.2006 - **Updated:** 03.27.2006

Lois's best friend, Vikki Wentworth, was lying on the bed with her hands resting softly on her stomach, a smile on her face as she watched her friends through her soft black waves of hair. Vikki said absolutely nothing as laughter rang out; nor did she join in. She hadn't heard the joke, anyway. Vikki had been daydreaming ? a usual pastime of hers.

Bloody Mary 1 - Chant My Name



Created: 03.27.2006 - **Updated:** 03.27.2006

Seated on the carpet next to the bed was Jo Best. Her red hair shone in the light and her blue eyes were full of smiles and tenderness. Jo was kind-hearted and sweet, and no one ever insulted her ? she seemed too fragile. Jo's laugh was quiet and soft and barely heard over the guffaws of her two other friends.

APPENDIX B

TABLE DETAILING THE SIMS WRITERS' HANGOUT FORUMS

Forum Name	Topics	Posts	Description
General Section			
Welcome to the Sims 2 Writers' Hangout	2997	38171	"Please introduce yourself to the group here."
Help, FAQ and Tutorials	895	4315	"Forum, <i>Sims 2</i> , picture, and general computer questions"
The Hangout Reporter	23	1013	" <i>Hangout</i> extras: feature interviews and special announcements"
Idea Box	66	1151	"Do you have a great new idea? Come inside to discuss making the <i>Hangout</i> a better place."
Hangout Activities	4	223	"Daily, weekly, and monthly games to keep our members connected!"
Chit Chat	11578	381525	"This board is for the regular chit chat. Just chit and chat."
<i>The Sims 2 Section</i>			
Sim 2 Talk	1016	26896	"Chat about our favorite game! Remember: questions go in <i>Help & FAQ</i> ."
The Sims 2 Bookshop	1900	36046	[A space for authors to share links to their <i>Sims 2</i> stories and for readers to post responses]
Sims 2 Inspired	1192	16743	" <i>Sims 2</i> Creativity at its best! Pictures, Movies & Requests"
Sims 2 Couturier	1792	23163	"Share your <i>Sims 2</i> creations, from clothing to genetics to make-up, Sims, objects and lots."

Sims 2 Custom Content Links	3863	26361	“Looking for the great hair style or piece of clothing you saw in one of our stories?”
<i>The Sims 3 Section*</i>			
Sims 3 Talk	14	762	“Chat about the latest addition to our favorite game! Remember: questions go in <i>Help & FAQ</i> .”
The Sims 3 Bookshop	15	168	“Read all the latest <i>Sims 3</i> stories.”
Sims 3 Inspired	9	220	“ <i>Sims 3</i> creativity at its best! Movies, Pictures & Requests”
Sims 3 Couturier	2	10	“Share you <i>Sims 3</i> creations, from clothing to genetics to make-up, Sims, objects and lots.”
Sims 3 Custom Content Links	9	32	“Whatever you want we’ve got it or we’ll be able to find it for you.”
<i>Sims Stories Section</i>			
Sims Stories: Advice, Ideas, and Tips	4407	35316	[A space to share general ideas and advice for creating <i>Sims</i> stories.]
The Vault	36	745	“The secrets of great <i>Sims</i> stories – Tutorials, tips, articles, exercises, name banks, etc. can be found in the <i>Vault</i> .”
Writers Lounge	47	751	“Original poetry, prose, or non- <i>Sims</i> stories? Post them here!”
<i>Contests Section</i>			
HNTM Season 4	48	1141	“The Hangouts Next Top Model – Season 4 – The teachers and tantrums of Male & Female teen models.”

Member Contests	156	3138	[A space for on-going contests and for members to create their own contests.]
Special Contests Archive	1249	67416	“Winners and archives of finished contests.”

Note. As of May 12, 2010. When available, descriptions quotes come directly from the *SWH* website.

* Indicates forums created as a part of the “revamp” in fall 2009.

APPENDIX C
TABLE CONTAINING DESCRIPTIVE INFORMATION ABOUT KEY
INFORMANTS

Pseudonym	Age*	Location	Date Joined <i>SWH</i>	Posts*	Role in <i>SWH</i> *	<i>SWH</i> Activities	Where <i>Sims</i> Creations are Hosted	Said about <i>SWH</i>
Angela	15	United States	Aug. 10, 2009	280	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, sharing story ideas, posting requests, using proofreaders, writing non- <i>Sims</i> stories	<i>Exchange</i> , self-created website	“The <i>Hangout</i> was serious business, which made me learn to take time on my stories and actually develop some good plotlines.”
192 Eastwood	19	England	Apr. 4, 2006	633	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, using proofreaders, entering contests	<i>Exchange</i> , Flickr®, blog	“Being involved with the <i>Hangout</i> was actually quite an intimidating thing as it was such a large community – I much preferred joining the smaller sites.”

Eleanor	18	England	Aug. 24, 2005	5675	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, role play, writing My Chemical Romance (a band)-inspired fan fiction, writing non- <i>Sims</i> short stories	<i>Exchange</i>	“The site had a lot of writers similar to me and there was always somebody to ask for advice about stories.”
Eve	23	United States	Oct. 17, 2005	3843	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, creating <i>Sims</i> movies, entering contests, creating photo editing tutorials	<i>Exchange</i> , self-created website, Flickr [®] , YouTube	“It kind of reminds me of a big all-girl school with a few boys, there are all different cliques and friend groups.”
Missy	23	England	Feb. 17, 2006	1591	Moderator	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, moderating and entering contests, moderating forums	<i>Exchange</i>	“The staff here are so dedicated to the members and just want to make it a great place for everyone to share their <i>Sims</i> obsession and literally <i>Hangout</i> .”

Naomi	18	United States	May 22, 2008	714	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading and writing <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, proofreading, using proofreaders, writing non- <i>Sims</i> short stories	<i>Exchange</i> , self-created website, blogs	“I think everyone on here has a unique and beautiful way of writing.”
Pamela	18	Canada	May 11, 2007	3409	Head Moderator	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, moderating and entering contests, moderating forums, welcoming new members, managing the site	Flickr®	“It’s supposed to be the <i>Writers’ Hangout</i> , and the chit chatting about random gossip or posting over 9000 pictures should come secondary.”
Zahrah	22	United States	Dec. 9, 2007	2228	Member	<i>Chit Chat</i> , reading <i>Sims</i> fan fiction, answering requests, moderating a contest, creating custom content	Flickr®, self-created websites, deviantART	“It’s a friendly place.”

Note. All informants identified themselves as female.

* As of June 1, 2010.

APPENDIX D

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD-APPROVED INFORMATION LETTER,
PARENTAL LETTER OF PERMISSION, AND YOUTH ASSENT

Learning through *The Sims* Online Fan Communities

Information Page of Google site

WELCOME to the information page about our research project: Learning through *The Sims* Online Fan Communities!

We are a research team working under the direction of _____ in the Division of Learning, Technology, and Psychology in Education at Arizona State University. We are conducting a research study to explore how online fan communities associated with the popular computer game *The Sims* might support computer-related learning.

We are inviting your participation in the study, which will involve providing written responses to a series of interview questions. We anticipate that you will spend about four hours responding to these questions over about a six month time period. Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your name will not be used.

The larger goal behind our research is to develop after school programs that encourage girls and women to get excited about computing and develop technology skills. We believe that you could shed some light on the things that motivate girls and women to pursue computer-related learning related to *The Sims* and the role of online fan communities in this learning. There will be no direct benefits or foreseeable risks to you resulting from participating in the study.

Your responses to the interview questions will be confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your participation in this study, please contact the lead investigator, Dr. Betty Hayes, by email at _____ or by phone at 480-965-2864. She will be happy to discuss the study in more detail.

Please enter your email address and date of birth in _____ if you would like to participate.

We will contact you soon. In the meantime, please contact us if you have any questions!

Sincerely,
Betty Hayes
Professor

Jayne Lammers
Research Assistant

Yoonhee Lee
Research Assistant

ASU IRB Approved Sign <u>As for Marc Rouse</u> Date <u>4/10/09 - 4/9/10</u>
--

Learning through *The Sims* Online Fan Communities
PARENTAL LETTER OF PERMISSION & YOUTH ASSENT

Dear Parent:

We are a research team working under the direction of Professor Elisabeth Hayes in the Division of Learning, Technology, and Psychology in Education at Arizona State University. We are conducting a research study to explore how online fan communities associated with the popular computer game *The Sims* might support computer-related learning.

We are inviting your child's participation, which will involve providing written responses to a series of interview questions. We anticipate that your child will spend about four hours responding to these questions over about a six month time period. Your child's participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to have your child participate or to withdraw your child from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Likewise, if your child chooses not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. The results of the research study may be published, but your child's name will not be used.

There will be no direct benefit to your child, and no foreseeable risks or discomforts related to your child's participation.

Your child's responses to the interview questions will be confidential. The results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but your child's name will not be used.

If you have any questions concerning the research study or your child's participation in this study, please contact the principal investigator, Betty Hayes, by email at betty.hayes@asu.edu or by phone at 480-965-2864. She will be happy to discuss the study in more detail.

Sincerely,

Betty Hayes
Professor

Jayne Lammers
Research Assistant

Yoonhee Lee
Research Assistant

ASU IRB	
Approved	
Sign	GA for Ma-R Ransa
Date	4/10/09 - 4/9/10

Parental Consent for Participation

I understand that by typing my name below I am signing this form and therefore am providing consent for my child _____ to participate in the above study.

Name

Date

Please provide a phone number so we can call to verify your consent:

Phone number

Best days/times to call

Youth Assent for Participation

I have read the description of the study that is printed above, and I understand what the procedures are and what will happen to me in the study. I have received permission from my parent(s) to participate in the study, and I agree to participate in it. I know that I can quit the study at any time.

Participant

Date

If you have any questions about you or your child's rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you or your child have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788.

APPENDIX E
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview Protocol

Start of Your *Sims* Activities

1. When did you first start playing *The Sims*? What prompted you to start playing?
2. When did you first starting visiting fan sites? What sites did you visit, and prompted you to look at them?
3. When did you start creating stories and what got you started?
4. What were the first kinds of stories you created?
5. What other *Sims* activities have you done/do you do? (For example, create custom content, create *Sims* movies, etc.)

Your Current *Sims* Activities

6. What versions of *The Sims* (including expansion packs) do you have?
7. How much time do you typically spend per week on:
 - Playing *The Sims*
 - Creating content/writing stories/etc.
 - Participating in *Sims* fansites
8. What has motivated you to participate in these activities over time?
9. When do you fit your *Sims* activities into your schedule?
10. Where do you host your *Sims* creations? (For example: Do you have a Sim Page on the EA site? A Flickr photostream for your *Sims* images? Your own website/blog that you use to display your *Sims* creations?)

Some General Questions about You

11. How would you describe the area where you live: urban, rural, or suburban?
12. Are you currently in school? If so, what degree/certificate are you pursuing?
13. Are you currently working? If so, what type of work?
14. What were your most favorite subject(s) in high school?

15. What were your least favorite subject(s) in high school?

Learning to Create *Sims* Content

16. What have been the most valuable resources in helping you learn to create content?

17. What software tools do you use?

18. What have you learned most recently?

19. What has been the most difficult thing for you to learn? How did you overcome this challenge?

20. What computer-related skills have you learned from creating *Sims* content?

21. Have you used what you have learned from making *Sims* content in any other area of your life? If so, please describe:

Resources for Learning

22. Is there any one approach that you find yourself doing first when you try to learn something new for content creation?

23. If you use online tutorials, what makes a tutorial particularly helpful or useful for you?

24. Could you name (and provide links to) one or two of the tutorials that you've found most helpful?

25. Was there anything that you tried to learn related to *Sims* content creation but weren't able to do?

26. Can you tell me about any kind of content creation technique that you haven't even considering pursuing? Why haven't you chosen to pursue this?

27. Is there anything that you would like to learn to create, but haven't yet? What might you need before your pursue this?

Participation in *The Sims Writers' Hangout*

28. How did you first figure out how to participate in *The Hangout*? Did you read their rules? Did you spend time reading what others had posted?
29. What parts of the site do you visit most frequently? Has your use of the site changed over time? How so?
30. What forms of communication do you use with others on *The Hangout*?
31. How often do you give others help and/or advice on story writing? Can you provide a recent example?
32. How often do you ask others for help and/or advice with your own writing/creations? Can you provide a recent example?
33. Do you communicate with members outside of *The Hangout* site? If so, how?
34. What has kept you coming back to *The Hangout*? What do you enjoy most?
35. *The Hangout* recently underwent a “revamp” – what are your thoughts about the changes in the community?

Computing Skills

36. Which of the following best describes how you would rate your own computer skills in relation to other people you know?
 - Basic
 - Average
 - Intermediate
 - Advanced
 - Superior
37. How confident do you feel about your ability to learn new computer-related skills?

38. How often do people in your life ask you for advice or help with computers or software?

Other Questions

39. What do others in your life think of your *Sims* activities?
40. To what extent do you consider yourself a “gamer”? Do others consider you to be a gamer?

Adapted from a protocol used in previous research (Hayes, King, & Lammers, 2008)

APPENDIX F

CHAPTER 3 DATA ANALYSIS SAMPLE

Data Snippet	My Thoughts	Post ID
I remember (oh boy this makes me feel ancient) during the second season of HNTM when Jaclyn turned in a picture that she had "frankensteined" together (though nobody called it that). Everyone was astonished at the concept... (using multiple parts to make one pose? wha-?). And now look at flickr. It's considered odd if you don't edit a photo up the wazoo.	new focus on digital image editing	Dec 30, 2008, 6:37pm
It's supposed to be the Writer's Hangout, and the chit chatting about random gossip or posting over 9000 pictures should come secondary.	chit chat	Dec 30, 2008, 7:12pm
Just because people aren't 100% in the Sims 2 Stories board or the Sims 2 Talk board doesn't mean they lost interest in the game. I still play a LOT but I don't generally post, especially in the stories board. I just have never found the urge to release a story, but I did love reading them.	affinity for reading stories more than writing them	Dec 31, 2008, 10:15pm
I used to adore this forum when it was about the writing. It used to be a place of brainstorming, help, and all about the stories. I feel this forum has changed from that now.	lack of focus on writing	Dec 31, 2008, 10:52pm
I do occasionally post advice, but since most people who post just fangirl and post nonsense ("OMG, lyk ur story iz so original!!!!), I don't know if people actually want a critique or not.	fan girl behavior	Dec 31, 2008, 12:37pm
My interest with the game and the Hangout started to fade. I only started to play the game to edit pictures. I only played the game because of the CC out there.	new focus on digital image editing	Dec 31, 2008, 2:29am
The Chit-Chat board has always been one of the more popular boards here, just fyi. When I joined in 2005 it was the same way, and it has been ever since	chit chat	Dec 31, 2008, 7:15am

APPENDIX G

CHAPTER 4 DATA ANALYSIS SAMPLE

Data Label	Data	Code	My Thoughts
Int #1 January, 25, 2010	I remember looking at all of the stories in the story section [of TSR] just for their pretty covers at first, and then I finally decided to check one out. It happened to be one of my favorite stories for about a year after I'd first looked at it, and it was actually the inspiration to create my own.	AD	"pretty covers" are showing her what's expected and out there. The first story she enjoyed was "the inspiration" to create her own stories.
Int #2 February 9, 2010	I heard about the Hangout by reading a story of one of the member's (sic) on the Exchange.	AD	Learning about <i>SWH</i> from the Exchange - these stories provide her with models on which to base her Design choices
Int #2 February 9, 2010	the only tutorial I used was on TSR and it was about creating custom story covers for the game. It was very helpful, considering I've been doing it ever since	D	The lessons learned from the tutorial shape her future creations
Int #2 February 9, 2010	I use Microsoft Word for some of my longer stories, and I also use Photofiltre to edit pictures for my game.	D	the tools she uses in the Designing process
Int #3 March 14, 2010	Babe, You're in Berkley: This idea I got from a neighborhood I was creating in the game. I wanted to make all of the families have individual and nice houses, and then I wanted to write about a group of teens.	AD	Inspiration for this fan fiction comes directly from the game and a neighborhood she's creating.
SWH Post, August 25, 2009	Proofread post for Melting Away "I've finished the first chapter, so now I need somebody to proofread it before I can post it."	D	Soliciting help from SWH

SWH Post, August 25, 2009	Proofread post for Melting Away (Includes teaser about the story, 6 requirements, and a link to the 'coming soon' thread)	R	As a finished product itself, this post represents her way of soliciting help that follows the conventions (AD) of the space
SWH Post, October 9, 2009	Proofread post for If You Leave: includes 4 requirements and a request for 2 proofreaders, and link to the coming soon thread	R	As a finished product itself, this post represents her way of soliciting help that follows the conventions (AD) of the space
SWH Post, September 18, 2009	Post by molly: Just one thing -- in your excerpt, there's a paragraph of description and this little bits of description. Try and get rid of the paragraph and spread it through out the action. It seems to get boring just reading about appearances. (I don't mean to sound rude, just saying.	D	Getting feedback on the idea, especially how she writes the descriptions.
SWH Post, September 18, 2009	Story Idea posted for If You Leave	R	This initial product of this story line contains a "basic idea" section and indication that she wants to try this in Sims 3, and a spoiler, then a request "Tell me what you think" - follows the AD of this 'Idea' practice on SWH
SWH Post, September 19, 2009	Angela to molly: Yeah, I get what you mean with the description. I was writing it really fast just to get something down before I completely forgot how I wanted the prologue to go. I'll work on that.	D	Acknowledgement of the feedback and a promise to work on it - such interactions seem to indicate that Angela is making Design decisions based on readers' responses

APPENDIX H

CHAPTER 5 DATA ANALYSIS SAMPLE

Source	Data	Code	My Thoughts
Re: <i>If You Leave</i> (idea thread) Sept 18, 2009, 9:31pm	Just one thing -- in your excerpt, there's a paragraph of description and this little bits of description. Try and get rid of the paragraph and spread it through out the action. It seems to get boring just reading about appearances. (I don't mean to sound rude, just saying.)	ID	reader response as pedagogy - couching the instruction in with an apology about not sounding rude
Pamela, <i>SWH</i> post, January 1, 2010	What should be the very first thing you do at <i>The Hangout</i> ? Why read the rules of course! By reading the rules, you will prove to everyone that you're an intelligent asset to this community. Often in large groups, people have a tendency to grow a little tired of the same questions being posted over and over. So please do yourself and all of us a favor, and learn the rules first!	RD	Emphasis on reading the rules first. Interesting that she used "intelligent asset"
<i>SWH</i> moderat or post, August 12, 2005	First offense: Warning PM from staff. Second offense: Suspension of variable length, dependent on offense. Third offense: Permanent ban	RD	Note the use of formatting to emphasis the regulative discourse
SSC Contest info, January 1, 2010	SSC: Extreme Makeover. For this challenge, you're given a Sim to makeover based on certain criteria	RR - Other Disc	Recontextualizing media discourse, reality tv, as pedagogy
Re: <i>To Be or Not to Be...</i> , <i>SWH</i>	I liked it Eve, the dancing and the kiss in the rain was brilliant! Your Sim guys are really hot! I thought maybe some more description could have been	Fan girl	Fan girl in reader response – this is popular in the space. What pedagogic value, if any, is there? Maybe this is an anti-example of pedagogy.

post
January
31, 2006

added

Writing
Activity
Decemb
er 18,
2005

Writer's block prevention ideas:
Pick a theme and then
brainstorm: Who, where, what,
when, why, how. In your
brainstorm, write down all the
different causes, reasons, and
people that could be involved in
death, and explore further into
other aspects of death, e.g.
funerals and inheriting money

RR
–
Oth
er
Disc
Recontextualizing brainstorming
discourses for pedagogy to help
with writing

Angela,
*If You
Leave*
thread,
August
31, 2009

That's not relative at all. I don't
want this thread to get locked for
being off-topic, so please don't
post that again!

RD
&
Flex
Role
s
Angela is acting as a transmitter
here, using regulative discourse
to chide a member who posted in
her story thread

Re: *If
You
Leave*
(idea
thread)
Sept 18,
2009,
9:31pm

Just one thing -- in your excerpt,
there's a paragraph of description
and this little bits of description.
Try and get rid of the paragraph
and spread it through out the
action. It seems to get boring just
reading about appearances. (I
don't mean to sound rude, just
saying.

Flex
Role
s
As an example of flexible roles,
this same post is an example of
Angela being the acquirer

Critique
in
Missy's
*Baby
Blue*
story
thread,
Septemb
er 30,
2006

Introduction: 8/10
I loved the scenes and the way
you started it off. I was instantly
hooked.
Likes: As I said before, I like the
previews you had at the end of
the chapter. I also loved how the
nurse was talking about the
Grayford's and then Lisa's law
firm is also working with them.
Dislikes: Can't think of any at the
moment [*sic*].
Graphics: 9/10
You have an awesome graphics

ID
&
Flex
Role
s
Missy is a moderator elsewhere,
but here she is an acquirer. Also
look at the format of the critiques
– these could be an example of
recontextualizing school-like
discourses



card and the scenes are awesome.
However, some of them could
use some more props.

APPENDIX I

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTERS:

INITIAL AND CONTINUATION

To: Elisabeth Hayes
EDUC - HIR

From:  Mark Roosa, Chair
Soc Beh IRB 

Date: 04/10/2009

Committee Action: Expedited Approval

Approval Date: 04/10/2009

Review Type: Expedited F7

IRB Protocol #: 0901003624

Study Title: Learning Through The Sims Online Fan Communities

Expiration Date: 04/09/2010

The above-referenced protocol was approved following expedited review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without approval by the Institutional Review Board.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.

To: Elisabeth Hayes
EDUC - HIR

From: Mark Roosa, Chair
Soc Beh IRB

Date: 04/13/2010

Committee Action: Renewal

Renewal Date: 04/13/2010

Review Type: Expedited F7

IRB Protocol #: 0901003624

Study Title: Learning Through The Sims Online Fan Communities

Expiration Date: 04/08/2011

The above-referenced protocol was given renewed approval following Expedited Review by the Institutional Review Board.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval of ongoing research before the expiration noted above. Please allow sufficient time for reapproval. Research activity of any sort may not continue beyond the expiration date without committee approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol on the expiration date. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study termination.

This approval by the Soc Beh IRB does not replace or supersede any departmental or oversight committee review that may be required by institutional policy.

Adverse Reactions: If any untoward incidents or severe reactions should develop as a result of this study, you are required to notify the Soc Beh IRB immediately. If necessary a member of the IRB will be assigned to look into the matter. If the problem is serious, approval may be withdrawn pending IRB review.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, or the investigators, please communicate your requested changes to the Soc Beh IRB. The new procedure is not to be initiated until the IRB approval has been given.

Please retain a copy of this letter with your approved protocol.