The game of life

Online gaming is far from the anti-intellectual, anti-social time waster it is commonly thought to be

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There's a real generational divide on the issue of video games.

For those older than 35 or so, games are mostly an unfortunate waste of time or, worse, a Trojan horse introducing our kids to violent, sexist themes. For those younger than 35, they are a leading form of entertainment, a resource for creativity and innovation, and -- contrary to the common stereotype -- a way to socialize.

While politicians like Hillary Clinton urge parents to boycott videogames that "offend their values and sensibilities," children and young adults continue to flock to such media. The Pew Internet & American Life Project has reported that more than eight out of every 10 kids in America have a game console in the home and over half have two or more. The U.S. National Endowment for the Arts has bemoaned "our society's massive shift toward electronic media for entertainment and information," like videogames that supposedly "make fewer demands on their audiences, ... require no more than passive participation, ... (and) foster shorter attention spans" than do books.

Yet, the gamers that I research engage in complex problem solving that rivals what's found in contemporary classrooms, build social capital through participation in online communities, and report on the positive role that games play in their lives.

As a 30-something academic interested in games and learning, I sit on the cusp of both worlds, often acting as translator between them. I talk to parents, teachers, librarians and other professors about the social and intellectual value of gameplay. And I talk to game players and designers about why education is important and how research on learning might have something important to say about how games are designed and experienced.

To be honest, in my experience, librarians are the easiest sell, teenage gamers the hardest. After all, even those who are doing well in school don't believe it's about much more than credentialing.

Schools are locked within a Ford factory model of industry and efficiency; games, on the other hand, are forward leaning, recruiting intellectual practices, dispositions, and forms of social organization that line up well with many of today's "new capitalist" workplaces. Games are incubators of a new pop cosmopolitanism -- a certain willingness and ability to navigate an increasingly globalized and therefore diverse, networked, sociotechnical world.

If our world is indeed increasingly "flat" as folks like Thomas L. Friedman claim it is, then gaming communities -- particularly the online games I research -- are our proverbial canaries in the coal mine.

Online game communities give us important clues about how to design learning

environments for classrooms. Games are complex, difficult, and take a long time to learn. Yet, players not only master them, they pay to do it.

Online games are highly graphical 3-D videogames played in persistent virtual worlds online. This means that individuals can interact not only with the gaming software (the virtual environment and computer-generated characters within it) but also with other players. This means that I can go out to slay a dragon not just by myself but with a team of folks I know in person, or only online.

In World of Warcraft, for example, folks vie for the chance to do large 40-person raids with others in order to take down tough challenges in the game world and, in so doing, earn virtual riches.

Such virtual worlds are significant. The current global player populations of the three game titles (out of dozens) that I research (Lineage I, Lineage II, World Of Warcraft) totals around 10 million -- a population greater than any U.S. metropolis. Moreover, thanks to out-of-game trade of in-game virtual items, the virtual economies of some popular titles now rival the economies of many real world countries.

In my research, we examine the various intellectual practices that online gameplay requires, and the way these converge into a form of cosmopolitanism. The intellectual practices we study include collaborative problem solving, reading and writing practices that use highly specialized language, scientific habits of mind such as hypothesis testing and revision, skills in information and communication technology (IT literacy), and argumentation.

Such practices are the mainstay of online gameplay. Together, they form that 21st-century skill set so crucial to democratic success: collaboration, inquiry, argumentation, media literacy (not just critical consumption but also production), and the ability to productively participate in the negotiation of shared meaning and values with folks that don't always look or live or view the world just like you.

Such environments, in fact, foster bridging social capital among those who participate -- social relationships that expose the individual to a diversity of worldviews.

While mainstream media commonly revert to a rhetoric of "addiction" to explain the passion and commitment with which players invest such time and intellectual labour into these games, they all too often ignore the most obvious and important function such virtual worlds play in the everyday lives of those who inhabit them: a social one.

Online games provide environments for social interaction and relationships beyond the workplace/school and home, thereby functioning much like the pubs, coffee shops, and other hangouts of old.

In cultures such as ours, where we increasingly spend our days bustling from home to school/work and back again, such "third places," as described by sociologist Ray Oldenburg, offer us a remedy from loneliness, alienation and boredom.

Perhaps more important, such spaces foster social relationships with a much wider and more diverse array of people than we might encounter otherwise -- people with backgrounds, ethnicities, politics, values, and tastes different from our own.

And in a world increasingly divided into niche markets, where the deluge of information, online and off, can result in people all too often choosing to engage with only those points of view they already hold, this exposure to diversity is crucial. Without it, we run the risk of slipping into our own personal forms of extremism and shrillness. As the famous sociologist Anthony Giddens once argued: "The battleground of the twenty-first century will pit fundamentalism against cosmopolitan tolerance. In a globalizing world, where information and images are routinely transmitted across the globe, we are all regularly in contact with others who think differently, and live differently, from ourselves. Cosmopolitans welcome and embrace this cultural

complexity. Fundamentalists find it disturbing and dangerous."

Online games provide one space where kids and young adults often find themselves engaged in play with individuals vastly different than themselves. This gives online games the potential to function not just as new virtual forms of the third places of old but also, believe it or not, a new form of 21st-century global citizenry. How? By fostering a core set of intellectual practices that are crucial to participation in successful democracy and a "pop cosmopolitian" disposition well suited to our increasingly globalized and therefore diverse world.

All that in the most unlikely of contexts, pop culture. And all that with the most unlikely of populations: gamers themselves.

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