

# Europa Universalis IV the Grandest LAN Party: A Case Study

Magdalene Moy, Drexel University, mkm99@drexel.edu

**Abstract:** Although there is disagreement among researchers about when, how, and which digital games should be used in formal educational settings, digital games are already present in classrooms. Affinity spaces provide both a theoretical framework and methodology for addressing this issue. The “EUIV Grandest LAN party” was identified as a source of novel insight for educational researchers, teachers, and game developers interested in serious games, learning through affinity spaces, and scaffolding within online gaming communities.

**Keywords:** Affinity spaces, Games, Online communities, Informal learning, Transformative play

## Introduction

Despite the abundance of research on digital games in educational settings, there remains a general lack of consensus among educational researchers on the topic. This may be due to the ever changing technological and digital gaming landscape or to the perpetual difficulty of describing the contexts suited for learning through digital games. “[H]ow can one theoretical framework account for both the moment-to-moment interactions that constitute gameplay (including the player’s goals and interactions) while also accounting for the broader socio-cultural contexts that constitute the activity?” (Squire, 2002). Research on affinity spaces help to bridge the *context* gap in games by attempting to describe both physical and virtual informal learning. This research extends the theoretical framework of affinity spaces by identifying a particular online gaming community as an ideal example of learning through affinity spaces.

The EUIV Grandest LAN party was a 4-day live-action role playing (LARP) campaign where attendees collectively played Europa Universalis IV (EUIV), a historical grand strategy game, but negotiated diplomacy and collaboratively strategized in-person within the walls of a medieval castle. A local area network (LAN) party is when people come together in a physical space to engage in collective game play. This particular LAN party was advertised worldwide through EUIV’s many social media websites and was designed by a LARPing company. The event was supported by EUIV’s game developer, Paradox Interactive, and advertised authentic learning activities, such as fencing and workshops on history, statesmanship, and the art-of-war. Previous research on the second edition of Europa Universalis, EUII, resulted in empirical findings supporting the educational value of the game (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, 2012). Egenfeldt-Nielsen writes, “I believe that the game [EUII] has educational potential, and I have conducted a two month-long history course, teaching with the game in a Danish high school involving 85 students and two teachers” (2012). This study utilizes Egenfeldt-Nielsen’s work on EUII to discuss the potential educational capabilities of EUIV and its unique affinity space. Additionally, this study adds to recent literature by describing the ways in which modern gamers interact with each other and how learning is facilitated through dynamic online networks. The EUIV LAN party serves as a bounded event in which to analyze how these online gamers designed an authentic learning experience for other EUIV gamers.

## Games and learning in affinity spaces

Affinity Spaces are described as informal learning spaces where a common endeavor connects all participants, in this case a game, EUIV (Gee, 2004). These informal learning spaces are spread across physical and virtual environments including the game itself (which allows for multiplayer campaigns), online forums (Reddit, Steam, and Paradox forums), social media (Facebook and Twitter), and video sharing sites (Youtube and Twitch). Therefore knowledge in affinity spaces is dispersed throughout its many participants, online tools, and technology (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). Digital games, computer and videogames, are particularly interesting for studying affinity spaces because gaming communities primarily are connected by online networks, these online networks leave a digital trail on the community’s activities and interactions (Lammers et. al., 2012). Learning sciences focus on interactive systems activity, therefore the individual is only a piece of the context and researchers must also focus on the interactional structures of the social and material systems (Steinkuehler, 2004). Game-focused affinity spaces can therefore provide a more holistic description of how learning is facilitated by the game itself and through the affinity space.

Games are designed experiences that are extremely useful context to study cognition (Steinkuehler, 2006). Additionally, immersive game-based learning environments for transformative play have been used as successful curricular scaffolds (Barab, Scott, Siyahhan, Goldstone, Ingram-Goble, Zuiker, & Warren, 2009).

The EUIV Grandest LAN party was an informal learning environment that incorporated transformative play through LARPing. Transformative play in games allows students' identities to meld with the player identity, overcome challenges through problem-based, contextually meaningful decision-making, provide motivation and grounds learning, and embeds authentic resources and tools (Barb et. al., 2009). Therefore, "the educational value of the game-playing experiences comes not from just the game itself, but from the creative coupling of educational media with effective pedagogy to engage students in meaningful practices" (Squire, 2002). If the EUIV Grandest LAN party can be studied as a product of its affinity space and a designed experience for its participants, then this study can elucidate how participants are motivated to interact, teach, and learn within this space.

This ongoing project aims to establish a basis for further research into EUIV's gaming community and culture - how does participation in the affinity space lead to socially regulated learning and is that learning valuable for education? Three core questions are pertinent to this case study: 1) What does EUIV Grandest LAN party's affinity space look like? Specifically, what portals are available through the game's networks and how do participants contribute and partake of the content? 2) What are the social motivations that led an online community to meet up for a 4-day LAN party? Or rather, what was the desired product of participants? And lastly, 3) How do participants apply their game-knowledge to the real-world and is there awareness of co-construction of knowledge?

## Research design

This exploratory case study expands on Lammer et. al. affinity space ethnographic methodology (2012). Preliminary research has been conducted to deconstruct the game (Aarseth, 2003), EUIV, to describe its affordances and constraints, and diagram the online networks and social media websites involved in the EUIV Grandest LAN Party's affinity space. Additional research will include in-depth interviews with the LAN party's attendees and discourse analysis of Youtube and Twitch videos of the event in order to illustrate the content and context of the experience. Attendees and participants of interest have been identified through social media networks. Participants of interest include two of EUIV's game developers who were special guests at the event, a historian and speaker for one of the workshops, and the LARPing company's CEO that hosted the event.

## Implications

The potential of games for learning remains shrouded in questions about which games should be used, what content games teach, and how they should be implemented. "Affinity spaces are an important part of gaming practices, and participation within them can enable a powerful form of social learning" (Pellicone & Ahn, 2015). Additionally, affinity spaces must be studied in their entirety including their physical context, online websites, and social media networks. This case study draws on a special gaming community's live event that has shown great potential for: 1) researchers interested in motivation and socially shared-regulation of learning in affinity spaces, 2) teachers and teacher educators interested in designing meaningful gaming experiences for learning, and 3) game developers interested in game affordances that encourage player buy-in and affinity space mediated content support. This study aims to describe a designed experience and its application for formal and informal learning environments.

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