

Learning and Literacy in an Online Gaming Community: Examples of  
Participatory Practices in a *Sims* Affinity Space

By

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of this research was to understand the different kinds of learning that take place in *Mod The Sims* (MTS), an online *Sims* gaming community. The study aimed to explore users' experiences and to understand learning practices that are not commonly observed in formal educational settings. To achieve this goal, the researcher conducted a four-year virtual ethnographic study that followed guidelines set forth in Hine (2000). After Hine, the study focused on understanding the complexity of the relationships between technology and social interactions among people, with a particular emphasis on investigating how participants shaped both the culture and structure of the affinity space.

The format for the dissertation consists of an introduction, three core chapters that present different sets of findings, and a concluding chapter. Each of the core chapters, which can stand alone as separate studies, applies different theoretical lenses and analytic methods and uses a separate data set. The data corpus includes hundreds of thread posts, member profiles, online interview data obtained through email and personal messaging (PM), numerous screenshots, field notes, and additional artifacts, such as college coursework shared by a participant. Chapter 2 examines thread posts to understand the social support system in MTS and the language learning practices of one member who was a non-English speaker. Chapter 3 analyzes thread posts from administrative staff and users in MTS to identify patterns of interactions, with the goal of ascertaining how users contribute to the ongoing design and redesign of the site. Chapter 4

investigates user-generated tutorials to understand the nature of these instructional texts and how they are adapted to an online context. The final chapter (Chapter 5) presents conclusions about how the analyses overall represent examples of participatory learning practices that expand our understanding of 21st century learning. Finally, the chapter offers theoretical and practical implications, reflections on lessons learned, and suggestions for future research.

## DEDICATION

To my wonderful mother and father with tremendous love and gratitude

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This study started from the moment that I read one of James Gee's books in the summer of 2007 with my doctoral friends. I was interested in Jim's work and wanted to learn more even before he came to ASU in 2007. So, I asked Jim to recommend a book and initiated a reading group over the summer. He suggested "What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy" which rocked my perception about video games, technology, and learning. I majored in computer science in undergraduate studies and always thought the major is not valuable in the field of education. After I read that book, I valued my prior education and began to see things differently. Clearly, I am very fortunate to work with Jim Gee, as well as Elisabeth Hayes, my chair. This study would not have been possible without them.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Overview of the Dissertation**

The main body of this dissertation consists of three articles that stem from a four-year, online, ethnographic study focused on learning and literacy in an online participatory, gaming community. In this chapter, I establish the framework for understanding gaming and learning from a new perspective. More focus on how players innovate with the resources in the game, and how this innovation in turn shapes the game, is needed. I outline why we should research online gaming communities and why their practices provide a new model for learning.

I then present three separate articles. The format for the dissertation follows the nontraditional track in which the articles are meant to stand alone, but are compiled here for the purpose of completing the doctoral program. In these articles, I address specific research questions related to practices in *Mod The Sims* (MTS)—an online *Sims* gaming community. First, I discuss how members, who are not native English speakers, in an online gaming community develop and use specialist language in English (Chapter 2). I then address the users' role in the design process of MTS (Chapter 3). Finally, I look at how users in this online gaming community learn new skills (Chapter 4). Each chapter applies different theoretical lenses and analytic methods and uses a separate data set. I include a



list of citations at the end of each chapter for ease of reference. All appendixes are compiled together at the end. In the following section, I briefly summarize each chapter.

Chapter 2, “Specialist language learning and gaming: Modding in a second language”, is about learning specialist language through participation in MTS. In this chapter, I argue that participation in an online, English language, gaming community enables a non-English speaker to acquire specialist language in English, thus, enhancing overall English proficiency. I identify social and linguistic elements of learning language in an affinity space as defined by Gee (2004). People interact in affinity spaces sharing “common interests and endeavors” (Gee, 2004, p.85), which enables them to overcome the effect and influences of more traditional, social dividers or barriers. I focus on the social support and language practices of my participant—a non-English speaker—and other members in MTS. Chapter 3, “Design is a collaborative and shared practice: A new perspective on user participation in an online gaming community,” is about how MTS users participate in site design processes, and how administrators invite users into design practice. I analyze interactive patterns among administrative staff and users through the affinity space theory advanced by Gee (2004). In chapter 3, I argue that design is a collaborative and shared effort through the cooperation among administrators and users. Chapter 4, “What user-generated tutorials teach us about teaching in an online gaming community: Understanding language practices through Systematic Functional Grammar,” addresses how specific language practices involving user-generated tutorials

promote learning as collaborative experiences. I apply Halliday's (1989) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to understand linguistic choices that tutorial authors made and how those choices were influenced by the online context. Language practices in and around these tutorials in online contexts revitalize orality in written instructional texts and create a perspective that instruction is collaborative and multi-dimensional rather than one-directional from instructor to learners.

In the final chapter of the dissertation, I draw holistic conclusions about this online community rather than analyze discrete data. I review each set of findings and implications, then discuss the limitations of virtual ethnography. Finally, I suggest future research directions to expand my study. To continue, I describe Gee and Hayes's (2010) notion of gaming beyond games that illustrates players' practices beyond video games. My dissertation is not a study about the video game, *The Sims*. Rather, it aims to understand the practices of users in an online *Sims* community that are associated with sharing their experiences, interests, skills, knowledge, and concerns. I use "users" rather than "members" because not all users are members. The word "users" encompasses the culture of this online space and reflects the idea that anybody can be part of this space; it is not limited to members. It also conveys the sense that the game is a user-driven space.

## **Gaming beyond Games**

The leading scholar of gaming and learning, James Gee, emphasized at the American Educational Research Association conference in 2011 that playing video games is not playing only within games. If players missed practices and activities around and related to games outside of games, they only play and enjoy half of the practices that games can provide. Gee and Hayes (2010) also accentuate that we need to pay more attention to how game players expand their identities as designers, writers, instructors, and coordinators through and for playing games. In addition, we need to understand the online gaming communities that Gee and Hayes (2010) refer to as *passionate affinity spaces* and the practices of these spaces where players often expand their identities to become more than just game players. Gee and Hayes claim that practices in passionate affinity spaces can be great examples of learning and human growth that prepare users for twenty-first century learning and education. Influenced by these scholars, I looked at playing games in different ways, and more specifically, I investigated MTS for my dissertation.

### **Why *The Sims* and *Sims* Fan Communities**

***The Sims.*** *The Sims* is a strategic, life-simulation game created by Will Wright and published by Electronic Arts from February 4, 2000. By March 2002, *The Sims* had sold more than 6.3 million copies and had become the best-selling video game in history (Walker, 2002). By spring 2008, 100 million copies were sold (Hayes & King, 2009) and it currently has released three versions: *The Sims*,

*The Sims 2*, and *The Sims 3*. The genre of this game is life simulation; *Sims* players create their own *Sims*, which are virtual persons in the game. Players take care of this virtual person and interact within the environment provided by the game. In the game, *Sims* can simulate almost everything that people can think of doing in real life. In addition, *Sims* can be an alien or a vampire, and players can even simulate imaginary experiences. Gamers can have amazing experiences depending on the way they play *The Sims* within the game. By playing the game, they introduce new ideas and bring other experiences into the game.

Even though *The Sims* players deal with complicated and demanding tasks to play the game successfully, *The Sims* and *Sims* players are treated as casual gamers that are considered mundane in the video game world. After Gee (2003) drew attention to learning principles from video games, many game scholars have provided evidence that learning principles occur in many video games (Black, 2008, 2009; Castronova, 2002; Hayes & King, 2009; Hayes & Lee, 2012; Lam, 2004; Lammers, 2011; Martin & Steinkuehler, 2010; Squire, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2007). Games used in these studies reflect mainly masculine themes, such as warfare, competition, shooting, conquest, and heroic exploits (Gee & Hayes, 2010). Games such as *World of Warcraft*, *Lineage*, or *Civilization*, were studied to illustrate the degrees of players' engagement, participation, achievement, concentration, and commitment in order to emphasize beneficial learning outcomes as a consequence of playing games. However, games like *The Sims*, which can be representative of casual games, has not received much attention until recently. *The Sims* was even called "The new dollhouse" (Schiesel, 2006)

because of the way the game is played. It is unlike first-person shooter games, such as *Call of Duty* or *Halo*, which would never be considered as “virtual toy gun play.” These games are rather considered as hardcore and serious. In spite of all the condescending images, *The Sims* is getting more attention and has been studied from different perspectives (the game itself and *Sims* fan communities) in the past few years (Hayes, King, & Lammers, 2008; Hayes & King, 2009; Gee & Hayes, 2010; 2011; Hayes & Gee, 2010; Hayes & Lee, 2012; Lammers, 2011; Lee, 2010a; 2010b). Building on these studies, in the following section I want to illuminate that *The Sims* can be a serious game in somewhat different ways.

**Playing casual games like hardcore games.** The main reason for considering the series of *The Sims* as a causal game is the content, which is life-simulation. Players control virtual persons that take care of ordinary life situations. According to a board of twenty insiders in the gaming industry (Waugh, 2006<sup>1</sup>), casual games share certain characteristics such as:

- All the rules can fit on a 3x5 index card
- Short duration of play and are easy to learn
- Low required investments for the player (time, money, hardware requirements, etc.)
- A game you don't have to devote your life to
- Games where you never point, click, and shoot at the same time
- And, of course, "If my mom can play it, it's a casual game."

To sum up these descriptions, casual games generally involve less complicated controls, and are less complex (Wallace & Robbins, 2006). Interestingly, reports

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1

[http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2621/gdc\\_casual\\_games\\_summit\\_2006\\_an\\_.php](http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2621/gdc_casual_games_summit_2006_an_.php)

show that major casual gamers are females (Waugh, 2006; Dobson, 2006; RealNetWorks, 2006). Therefore, can we believe that gamers play casual games as casual gamers because games are not competitive or less complex to play? Or should we consider them casual gamers because these they do not devote their life to playing game? Thus, are *Sims* players casual gamers because they play less complex games compared to *World of WarCraft*? How about playing a game that the player herself creates out of the game? Is the game still casual when the players set complex goals that the original game did not provide? I want to discuss answers in playing video games by looking at different ways of playing games that can also bring new perspective of participation.

Based on previous discussions about casual games, *The Sims* has several characteristics of a casual game: 1) it is easy to learn and play; 2) it is not a competitive game; 3) it does not have a winning/final stage; 4) it does not require the player to point, click, and shoot at the same time; 5) and the majority of players are female. If gamers only play *The Sims* within the game without challenges, *Sims* players may face less complicated and complex rules. However, many *Sims* gamers also use online fan communities to expand their play to outside the game and bring in other elements that allow them to play the game differently than it was intended by its creators. By using these tools and others like them, players develop new, more complicated and complex play spaces inside and outside of *The Sims*. Further, they devote tremendous time and effort to learn new skills in order to play *The Sims* in their own ways. For example, players may want to create new *Sims* characters (Mario Brothers, real actors and

actresses, bobots), new objects, and new functions (more TV channels, video from Youtube).

These players need to learn how to use photo-editing and 3D graphic software to create their own customized objects to bring them into *The Sims*. Also, they need to have an understanding that goes beyond the game to function at this advanced level. The software and knowledge needed to add more functions to *The Sims* are highly complicated and complex. Additionally, *The Sims* does not require complicated and complex actions inside the game, such as clicking, pointing, and shooting simultaneously. However, some *Sims* gamers take it to this level outside the game in fan communities; oftentimes it then resembles a hardcore game, though the challenges are not based on hand-eye coordination, but managing complex systems and creating content. The rules and skills cannot fit on only 3x5 index card. Developing some of these skills require a great deal of time, money, hardware, and software. Some gamers devote their life to learning these skills to create new objects. They also do multi-functional tasks. The complexity of using the software and learning new skills might be compared to the complexity of playing *World WarCraft*.

Juul (2010) explained how some gamers play causal games in what people called hardcore ways; at the same time, he proposed that people need to look at ranges of different involvement and players, instead of looking at game play in dichotomized ways, such as casual vs. hardcore. In other words, players can be somewhere in between hard-core and casual gamers. The *Sims* players are great examples of this. Juul (2010) described flexibly designed games such as *Guitar*

*Hero*, *Rock Band*, and *The Sims*, which do not force players to adopt the game's official goals, such as accomplishing quests, completing combats, or finding all the treasures. These flexibly designed games allow players to decide how they want to play. Thus, it makes more sense to understand how gamers interact and play depending on their interests rather than defining games as casual or hardcore.

Gamers can play simple games in hard-core ways; on the other hand, gamers can play hard-core games in causal ways. For example, *Angry Birds* is known as a casual game that does not require complex and multifunctional tasks to play. The player uses birds to crash the architecture and kill all of the pigs without trying to create new ways to get higher scores. However, if the player sets his/her own goals to get all three stars on each level, the player has to get certain scores. In this case, players should use a minimal number of birds because unused birds will give 10,000 points each. Players should also smash as many objects as possible because each smashed objects adds points. Some players spend hours and hours playing the same level to get three stars and understand each bird's strength and weakness, its orbit, and its path. Also, the player needs to analyze the structures and their material at the same time. Further, the player needs to develop strategies to use birds most efficiently and understand each bird's characteristics and the fundamental physics of each bird's orbit in order to achieve all three stars in all levels. This is not a casual way of playing *Angry Birds* anymore. This example illustrates that we need to pay more attention to players' practices and choices that can embody how they expand their experiences of playing games based on their interests and how online environments facilitate



these expanded experiences for players. To continue this discussion, I describe practices and experiences of *Sims* players in an online *Sims* gaming community.

**Mod The Sims (MTS).** *Mod The Sims* is the most popular modding community among many other *Sims* fan communities. The word modding commonly used in game communities refers to modifying content or ways of playing games to perform a function not originally intended by game designers.

According to the definition of MTS, mod is

...is a broad term, meaning anything you do to change or add stuff to, in our case, the Sims2 game. All the things you find in the Downloads section are mods. Modding is the term used for making such mods. ([http://www.modthesims2.com/wiki.php?title=Modding\\_Glossary](http://www.modthesims2.com/wiki.php?title=Modding_Glossary))

Based on the MTS definition, modding is creating anything and adding the creations to *The Sims* in MTS. The Downloads section had 76,009 items related to *The Sims 2* and *The Sims 3* by February 26, 2012. The items are categorized as Lots & Housing, Programs and Utilities, Game Mods, Sims, Body Shop, Build Mode, Buy Mode, Themed Sets, Pets, Challenge Themes, Miscellaneous, Patterns, or MTS' Top Items. All these items were not provided by the original games and were created by MTS users who want to share their creations with other users. As I briefly explained above, some items require advanced skills to create 3D objects. Some software under the Programs and Utilities section, such as Blender 2.6 TS3 Tools, MilkShape Plugin: Cat's Sims Mesh Mirror, MilkShape Unimesh plugins, were developed by users to modify 3D *Sims* objects more easily. These programs are free, open-source software available to any user. Players dedicate their time, effort, knowledge, and skills to develop software to

play *The Sims* in their own way and help other players who want to play *The Sims* differently too.

Another popular way to play *The Sims* is represented by contests in MTS which are highly reflected in Hayes and Gee's (2010) notion of "double simulations." Double simulation refers to the use of a simulation game, such as *The Sims*, to simulate another game. *Mod The Sims*, has one forum, *Sims Contests*, in which people compete to come up with a new way to play *The Sims*. Each challenge has its own final winning stage with descriptive goals and rules for winning the contest. Here is one example of the contest description and the rules to become a *Sim Real Estate Agent*, created by a teenage girl. I did not edit any grammar and punctuation mistakes to keep the content of original post as much as possible.

In this contest, you will play the role of an aspiring real estate agent who wants to be at the top. (As in, the person who wins is, well– The "Top Dog", the best agent. What ever name floats your boat, basically!) Every round I will give you a personalized client profile. From this, you will need to carefully plan, create, show off, and attempt to sale your property. Unlike last cycle, this time around, Sim Real Estate will give everyone a second chance, even if you fail to satisfy your client's needs.

So, do you think you have what it takes to become the top realtor? Join today, and we'll just have to see!

Contest Rules:

- Build as close to plans as possible.
- Custom Content is allowed, so, use as much as you'd like.
- You are not to furnish any homes you build, unless it specifically says so. However, you should, at minimum, add things like lights, alarms, and any other things that would come included with a brand new house.
- Stay under budget or at budget.
- Build according to the client's profile.
- Have fun (MTS post, May 31, 2009)

This contest has five rounds to win. Three judges examine the quality of participants' work and decide if it will satisfy the clients' needs. Each participant should know their tasks and clients on each round and build *The Sims* house to meet all requirements in the floor plans. The floor plans are actual floor plans from the free websites of house builders. Contestants must be creative to build unique houses while staying under budget. The quality of the houses for this contest is enormous and extensive. Participants spend time and effort competing in this contest in and out of *The Sims*. People who create the contests come up with "new rules of play" (Salen & Zimmerman, 2003), and they write scenarios for the situational settings, create lists of rules to meet the expectations, and set up judging rules for each round. These contest creators are Professional-Amateur game designers which Leadbeater and Miller (2004) defined as Pro-Ams. They are acting like game designers who created the space and develop rules for playing games. The game designer, Katie Salen (2007), states that game designers control players' experiences by designing the rules of play. These contest creators lead players to new experiences by creating their own rules for playing *The Sims*. They change *The Sims*, which is a non winning-state game, to a winning-state and goal driven game.

Another popular practice among MTS users is creating characters from other game platforms that the original *Sims* does not provide. For example, *Super Mario Bros* is a Nintendo game that is very popular in the MTS social forum. One teenage boy created the social group named *Nintendorks*, which is a group of

all Nintendo fans of any series. The biggest project in this social group is using *The Sims* to create all of the characters in *Super Mario Bros* and the elements in that game, such as castles. The original *Sims* game does not provide characters from other games. Thus, members in this social group share their creations related to *Super Mario Bros* and play *Super Mario Bros* in *The Sims*, with their own ways of playing the *Sim* version of *Super Mario Bros* (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The *Sims* screenshot of *Super Mario Bros* characters.

The two characters in the screenshot were created by the teenage boy and shared with all other members of the Nintendorks group. Other members can then use them how they want to when they play the *Sims* version of *Super Mario Bros*. People who create these new characters dedicate their time and effort to making new items or characters for their own use in the *The Sims*. People who play *The Sims* this way create a hybrid-version of the game. This hybrid-version is

dependent on how players set their goals and rules of play. They simply add these characters into *The Sims* and play *The Sims* in ordinary ways or they try to set rules to play other ways, such as with the example of *Super Mario Bros*. Either way, players need to set their own goals and rules to play their own version of the game. This example demonstrates another way of playing *The Sims*.

There are more ways to play *The Sims* differently that rely on choices made by players who become writers, directors, and photographers. These examples add to the discussion about the importance of how gamers play games instead of focusing on defining the genres of games. Juul (2010) defines how to play games from three different perspectives: 1) the game as goal orientation; 2) the game as experience; and 3) the game as a social event. Examples related to *The Sims* and MTS represent a social event rather than *The Sims* as a goal oriented event, except where players introduce contests. These new perspectives of understanding games open a discussion about players' choices and participation. The game is a social event focused on the experiences of players who are the main actors of the event and experiences. It is time to move the focus from the game to the players.

### **The Purpose of the Study**

According to Collins and Halverson (2009), the development and level of technology in our lives changes the ways we make sense of the world and our expectations for how we live. Schools should prepare students for new lifestyles and expectations in the 21st century work place, which current school systems

cannot easily provide compared to some online communities. In online communities, people interact by sharing their interests, skills, knowledge, and concerns. They learn “just-in-time” (Gee, 2003) when they need it and want to. Online communities can cater to individual preferences, individualizing learning in a collaborative and scaffolded environment (Collins & Halverson, 2009). These out-of-school learning experiences provide different perspectives on learning and teaching that can influence formal school learning. Students are already developing new expectations and ways of learning in out-of-school contexts, while schools are still figuring out how to embrace new models of education. The purpose of this study is to explore one particular online gaming community to deeply understand the practices and experiences of users.

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## CHAPTER 2

### SPECIALIST LANGUAGE LEARNING AND GAMING: MODDING IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

#### **Introduction**

Studies of learning associated with video gaming and participation in fan communities have demonstrated varied outcomes in literacy development, IT fluencies, scientific reasoning, and the understanding of history (Gee, 2003, 2004; Hayes, 2008, 2008b; Squire, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2007). Adding to these past works, this study focuses on a particular type of literacy learning—the acquisition of specialist English by an Second Language (L2) learner through participation in a *Sims* fan community, *Mod The Sims* (MTS), which is devoted to three-dimensional game *modding*. Users in this space mainly interact in English, thus L2 learners must interact in English too. According to research in literacy and language studies, the acquisition of specialist language is essential for deep and successful participation within any domain of practice such as academia, specialized workplaces, and other professional fields. The notion of specialist language adopted here is borrowed from Gee (2004) and refers to the language practices used for special purposes and activities in a specific domain. Scholars have documented that full participation and success in various settings such as academia, the workplace, and even virtual worlds depend on the extent to which learners acquire and use language affiliated with these communities (Gee, 2004;

Martin, 2005; Ruiz-Garrido, Palmer, & Fortanet, 2010; Schleppegrell, 2004).

As a game-related, affinity space, MTS provides an effective environment for language acquisition because it provides a supportive and engaging learning environment that is typically not found in traditional English-learning environments such as schools. This setting also gives L2 learners the opportunity to develop IT skills while learning to use three-dimensional graphic design software and photo-editing programs along with acquiring specialist language in English through meaningful social practices. This hands-on, virtual training ties the practical application of technology with the cognitive functions of specialist English language learning. It is essential for users in this community to acquire and articulate specialist language related to three-dimensional, modding skills in order to understand how to use the software and to participate in MTS.

In this paper, I address a question of importance pertaining to L2 learners and technical virtual spaces: How do members develop and use specialist language in English that is specifically within the context of MTS? To answer this question, I explored how one L2 learner acquired specialized English by using English in three-dimensional graphic design software programs and by participating in the online fan community, MTS. More specifically, I address the following elements of English, specialist language learning in MTS:

- 1) The ways in which new members are mentored by advanced members to become familiar with specialist language
- 2) The trajectory of language practices of a L2 learner
- 3) Examples of environmental support for learning English.

## Theoretical Perspectives

This study is grounded in a sociocultural perspective on learning and language (Gee, 1997, 2010). Sociocultural theory stresses learning and knowledge as processes that occur as a result of participation in socially and culturally constructed and situated contexts. In other words, people learn language by doing activities in social contexts and by using language to get things done. Learning can be viewed as the process in which members become able to participate in a community and show their understanding through talk, text, experiences, identity affiliation, and use of resources (Cazden, 1988; Gee, 2004; Heath, 1983; Ochs & Shieffelin, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Based on sociocultural perspectives on learning, researchers have argued that the acquisition of specialist language can only happen within the social and local contexts of the communities in which specialist language is valued and used (Gee, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010, 2010b; Hayes & Lee, 2012; Lemke, 1990, 1997; Saul, 2004; Schleppegrell, 2004). According to Gee (2004),

people learn specialist languages and their concomitant ways of thinking best when they can tie the words and structures of those languages to experiences they have had—experiences with which they can build simulations to prepare themselves for action in the domains in which the specialist language is used (p. 4).

Researchers in new digital media studies have begun to study video games and gaming fan communities—called affinity spaces—as sites for situated learning in which participants acquire specialist language through their engagement in game-based simulations (Gee, 2003; Gee & Hayes, 2010; Squire, 2004; Steinkuehler, 2007; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008). In this study, I apply Gee's (2004) affinity

space theory to my research as a framework to identify the distinctive features of MTS that facilitate and reinforce specialized language and overall English language fluency.

### **Affinity Space**

Affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are common and important interactional places in high technology period, typically found online spaces. People interact in affinity spaces sharing “common endeavors” (p.85) which enable them to overcome the effect and influences of more traditional, social dividers or barriers. Understanding affinity space is crucial for analyzing language practices and learning in MTS in this study. To facilitate such an understanding, I elucidate Gee's definition and explain how some features of MTS help users overcome language barriers and continue to pursue their goals.

While Gee identified eleven features of an affinity space, I selected four features to use as a conceptual framework for my research. These include: 1) [a] common endeavor is primary; 2) newbies, masters, and everyone else share [the] common space; 3) both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged; and 4) there are many different forms and routes to participation (p. 87). The first feature—common endeavor—provides the topics, which are *The Sims* games and content creations in MTS, about which people can easily engage others in conversation and share their interests. Especially when language learners have shared topics with language partners, they can participate in language practices easily because they have something to speak about (Cary, 2007). The second

feature—newbies and masters interacting in the same space—provides varied opportunities for learners based on their choices and goals, as well as different learning trajectories depending on their abilities and decisions. The third element of affinity space that supports learning in MTS, especially specialist language learning, is acceptance of both intensive and extensive knowledge and encouragement of the varied ranges of knowledge practices. Intensive knowledge is specialized knowledge; extensive knowledge is broader and less specialized knowledge.

In this study, intensive and extensive knowledge apply to two different dimensions; the former is tied to modding skills, and the other one is related to using specialist English language. *Mod The Sims* allows users not only to use and develop intensive and extensive knowledge, but it also promotes community encouragement for this kind of language and participation. This atmosphere influences users in MTS to pursue opportunities to learn and share knowledge in three-dimensional modding and specialist language through interactions that range from beginner to expert. The last theoretical feature addresses how users participate in different forms and routes. Depending on users' choices, they can decide to participate in activities that range from peripheral to centralized (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Lave and Wenger (1991) addressed that the importance of mastering specific skills and knowledge in certain communities to fully participate in the “sociocultural practices of [the] community” (p.29). Through socially and culturally situated practices, newcomers move from peripheral participation to the midmost of the communities of practices. Users in MTS can

choose their roles as modders such as creating *Sims* body parts, new objects, or new building designs. They can also decide the levels of participation in MTS from *lurkers* (Jone, 1999) to tutorial writers, moderators (doing administrative work in MTS), and/or social cheerleaders.

These four theoretical elements of affinity spaces provide a framework to understand how affinity spaces such as MTS facilitate and encourage users' learning in three-dimensional modding and language. This situated context appealing, because language learners—both English speakers and non-English speakers—can choose their own ways of using language learned from MTS based on common endeavors. In doing so, users typically reproduce language to respond to or answer others' questions, as well as leave comments on others' posts allowing all modders, newbies and masters, to interact in the same space. Furthermore, there are ample ways to demonstrate either extensive or intensive knowledge such as writing tutorials for specific skills and creations. Even these tutorials are constructed in several forms: a) traditional written tutorials that have only texts; b) multimodal texts tutorials that have written texts with visuals including screenshots and photos; or c) video tutorials that consist of video with or without verbal explanation, such as YouTube. These multifarious ways and levels of participation recruit more users in MTS from the novice to the expert and lead them to pursue their goals and interests at their own pace and through their own routes.

## Mode of Inquiry

This case study is part of a larger ethnographic research project to investigate IT learning and the acquisition of language. To apply ethnographic methods in online spaces and virtual worlds (Black, 2008; Hine, 2000, 2009; Markham & Baym, 2009), I engaged in what Jones (1999) refers to as lurking, or looking around a virtual space. I have lurked in this affinity space since 2008, which over time enabled me to become familiar with the interface and the culture. I have observed how site members interact and what kinds of meanings these interactions convey within this particular cultural space. This affinity space has its own “shared social practices” (Hine, 2000, p.19) defined by this particular virtual environment, which in turn influence users’ interactions and experiences. Additionally, Hine (2009) emphasized the influences of the particular technologies in social practices in the virtual field. Among *The Sims* online fan communities, MTS has emphasized three-dimensional modding that constructs specialized knowledge development and uses specialized languages depending on the target knowledge. These particular shared social practices create the culture of MTS and users become accustomed to it. Thus, it is important to understand MTS culture and shared practices in order to understand how users acquire specialized language through the process of acclimation.

Grounded in situated learning theory and investigated through the use of specialty English, my data is focused on interactions within dialogues of my participant that reveal the English-language learning process and the environmental support system in MTS for English language learners. At the same



time, ethnographical artifacts, including survey and interviews helped me to more deeply understand my participant, Nicole (pseudonym), and her language practices in MTS through her self-reflection.

To get participants whose first language is not English, I posted an announcement on January 27, 2011, in the one of the sub-groups in MTS—The Teen Club—to recruit members who started with little knowledge in three-dimensional modding as non-English speakers. I chose The Teen Club because I was interested in adolescents' perceptions of learning from MTS compared to formal learning in school settings.

### **Research Context**

My interests in technology learning and playing *The Sims* guide me to explore several *Sims* online fan communities and discovered modding is an exceedingly popular topic among *The Sims* players. The word “modding” commonly used in game communities refers to modify content or ways of playing games to perform a function not originally intended by game designers. In other words, modding the games is the process of application and production of players' comprehension of the rules of games to create different ways of playing the games depending on players' desires and levels of modding skills. In *The Sims communities*, modding means mainly creating content by using three-dimensional and photo-editing software and add custom content creation into *The Sims 2* or *The Sims 3*. The popularity of modding in *The Sims* communities led me to find the most active modding community, *Mod The Sims* (MTS):

http://www.modthesims.info/), in 2008. By July 2011, MTS had more than 1,659,000 members who had written more than 2,471,000 posts on more than 216,000 threads divided into five categories of forums. Each forum has many sub-forums and under some sub-forums, there are additional sub-forums (Figure1).

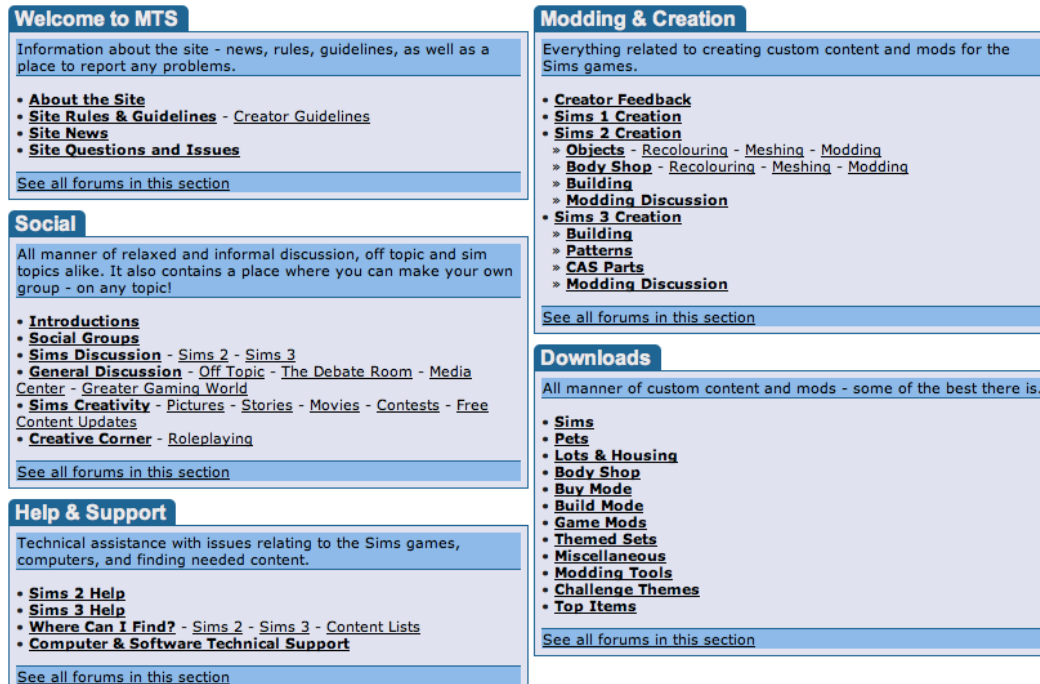


Figure 2. The Site Map of Mod The Sims.

As Figure 2 shows, there are more sub-forums under the five big categories; additionally, each sub-forum has more child-forums. This massive online community is equipped with a range of topics that reflect users' interests and address their inquiries. According to a report issued in 2011 by the site's owner, MTS added 1,080,521 new members, had 406,910 new posts, and 36,170,262 visits in 2010 alone. Mod The Sims defines itself as one of the largest Sims 2 and Sims 3 sites that provides custom content creations and premier downloads. *Mod*

*The Sims* was founded in May, 2004, and is privately owned. The owner launched the site with the help of a small number of friends. By January, 2011, MTS grew to a voluntary staff of thirty-seven members. Members create new *Sims* contents and share with other *Sims* players; some members help other members' modding; and the management team assists run this site. All activities in MTS including content creations, teaching modding skills, and management of the site are voluntary. The culture of acceptance, support, and openness in MTS encourages users to make their roles active and vigorously dedicate their activities to maintaining this online community.

### **Participant**

**Nicole.** After I posted my recruitment for participants, I got a response the next day through Personal Message (PM), on January 28, 2011, from Nicole (pseudonym), a 19-year-old college student in Madrid, Spain, who was majoring in architecture. She became an MTS member in October, 2008, when she was a 16-year-old high school student. Her first language is Spanish; however, she actively participates in MTS using English. Her *Sims* activities started back in 2002 with *The Sims 1* when she was 10 years old. She visited MTS and joined it just to "download stuff." Then on January 2009, she found the social groups and forums. She loved it and joined some social groups, and even made her own social groups.

Starting the social group greatly facilitated Nicole's participation. She reported, "some of my best friends are from here (personal communication,

January 31, 2011),” and that her initial motivation to participate in MTS was interacting with others. She also said, “I joined this place just to download some stuff, but then in January of 2009 I found the social groups and forums and I loved it” (personal communication, January 31, 2011). She was more interested in socializing and chatting with other people who liked *The Sims* to share their common interests. People in MTS welcomed her, shared similar interests, which is the main characteristic in affinity spaces, and encouraged her greater involvement. This made it easy for her to communicate with others related to playing *The Sims* and modding its content, even though she was a non-English speaker. In spite of a language barrier, Nicole enjoyed sharing her interests with others and developing relationships with numerous people all around the world. The opportunity for language practices in this affinity space encouraged her toward better English usage and practices.

Additionally, Nicole loved *The Sims’ Bodyshop*, software built into *The Sims* that allows players to change *Sims* body features. She also loved gothic themes, so she created some body parts that could be used as gothic Sims. However, she realized her creations were not sophisticated enough compared to other creators' examples in MTS. From January to June 2009, she studied modding and read about a hundred tutorials in MTS and other online Sims’ communities. She posted her creations on the Creator Feedback Forum in MTS in order to get comments from other creators. Her first step in modding was limited within *The Sims Bodyshop*, and focused on eyes and make-up; however, she expanded her modding practices from body parts to houses and objects in *The*

*Sims 3*. Her later designs were more tied to meshing, which is considered a sophisticated modding skill in MTS, using three-dimensional editing programs such as *Millshape*, *3DS Max*, *Wings 3D*, and *Blender*.

Nicole's early participation was relatively passive and included just downloading items and reading others' posts. Then she joined a social group, becoming an active participant and using resources in MTS to become a content creator. By June 28, 2011, she had become known as a popular eye-creator and building designer. She wrote 5,940 posts, got 25,960 thanks, and 996,910 downloads. She has the official nickname "mad poster" from MTS and helps run the Introduction Forum and the Site Issues Forum. Furthermore, she wrote two tutorials and she helps people to navigate around the site and improve their creations. Nicole's interactions as she moved from peripheral participation to core participation (Lave & Wenger, 1999) were completed in her second language, English.

### **Data Corpus**

Nicole loved MTS, actively participated in it, and was eager to share her learning experiences in MTS. Since she posts so much, I could not find her very first post in MTS, because MTS only allows the last 3,000 posts to be shown as of January 2011. Currently (as of July, 2011), MTS only shows the last 500 posts for an individual. The oldest post she could access was written on January 14, 2009 on the social group that she created. I collected all of her accessible posts and creations in MTS on January, 2011.

When collecting Nicole's posts, I focused on threads that would present information about the progress of her modding skills and the development of her English language learning. Her posts on the Creator Feedback Forum were particularly useful in this regard. Additionally, I found 163 threads she initiated. I collected 256 posts she wrote from January 29, 2009, to August 29, 2010, on the Creator Feedback Forum. Language usage in the Creator Feedback Forum demonstrated specialist English language practices along with every day English.

### **Data Analysis**

With such a large database, I was able to identify the social aspects and linguistic elements of this gaming fan community that would facilitate and scaffold (Vygotsky, 1978). Nicole's language skills related to technical learning, everyday use, and specialty English. To examine the process of language learning, I applied Gee's (2011) method of D/discourse analysis to determine

how the person [my participant, Nicole] was using language, as well as ways of acting, interacting, believing, valuing, dressing, and using various objects, tools, and technologies in certain sorts of environments to enact a specific socially recognizable identity and engage in one or more socially recognizable activities ( p. 181).

Furthermore, using this form of analysis allowed me investigate the development of Nicole's English skills as they related to the establishment of belongingness to MTS, as an advanced member of the affinity space, and as a three-dimensional modder.

To understand social aspects that supported Nicole's learning experiences in MTS, I examined: 1) speeds of responses among users to Nicole's posts; 2) the

numbers and variations of comments, which range from cheering-up to highly technical information about Nicole's creations; and 3) Nicole's interactions with special members whom Nicole referred to as friends. These social aspects helped Nicole to build a strong sense of belongingness to MTS and social bonding, which encouraged her to overcome language barriers and communicate more effectively in English (Hall & Verplaetse, 2000). To focus more heavily on linguistic elements, I investigated "certain words and grammatical structures including types of phrases, clauses, and sentences" (Gee, 2011, p.156) to identify specialized patterns of language usage. In addition, I compared her earliest and most recent comments to those of other creators. The purpose of the comparison was to evaluate the development of her discourse as a popular eye creator who creates Sims eyes.

## **Findings**

In this section, I illustrate Nicole's language-learning trajectory in MTS. I also present data from forum posts in MTS, interviews, Nicole's *Sims* creations, and other writing samples that demonstrate Nicole's language experiences and practices. First I identify social elements that facilitate language practices and then move to linguistic elements of specialist language learning.

### **Social Elements of Language Practices in MTS**

In this section, I illustrate the social aspects that support Nicole's learning experiences in MTS and a strong sense of belongingness within MTS, which

ultimately were integral to her communication in English. I analyzed the sense of affiliation, on-demand and just-in-time learning support, and the promptness of responses to Nicole.

**The sense of affiliation.** The core character of the affinity space (Gee, 2004)—sharing common endeavors and interests—led Nicole to find and to participate in MTS for two and a half years. This feature of the MTS affinity space also encouraged her to join 45 social groups, which covered topics from very personal, such as “Unpopular People,” to highly technical, three-dimensional modding, such as “Meshers United” (See Appendix A for the list of social groups and a description of groups which Nicole is a member). According to her responses to the initial survey (See Appendix B), which asked about general experiences related to *The Sims* and fan communities, the social relationship was the important reason and motivation that Nicole kept participating in MTS along with her interest in *The Sims*, downloading, and creating content. Her interactions and communications in the social groups on varied topics and interests facilitated her goals both in modding and socializing. She expressed the importance of socialization in MTS on one answer from the initial survey. The question asked “What has motivated you to participate in these activities over time?” and she answered, “Lack of a social life xDD No, seriously, I didn't have much friends and I had lots of free time, and here I found a place to talk to many people from all over the world, it was amazing” (personal communication, January 31, 2011). According to survey responses, her journey in MTS started by interacting in many social groups, then moved to engaging in the Creator Feedback Forum. As she



responded, she made many friends all around the world and has been communicating through posts in forums, MTS chats, and Skype chats. She has communicated with all these people since October, 2008, which has provided her with reading and writing opportunities in English in very authentic and situated environments.

Recent scholars in new digital media studies have demonstrated how language learning is facilitated in digital environments and the importance of developing a sense of affiliation in these environments to reach learners' goals (Black, 2008, 2009; Lam, 2004; Ito, 2010; Ito et al, 2010). The sense of affiliation creates a comfortable environment in which to interact with other English language users. Users' common goals in this affinity space also create a situated and authentic language-using environment, which many scholars in second and foreign, language learning education believe is important for second-language learning (Cook, 1997; Faltis & Coutler, 2008; Hinkel, 2005; Pennycook, 2010; Valdes, 2004). Nicole, an English language learner (ELL), changed her goals from socializing to becoming a modder and a helper in MTS. These dramatic changes in her goal set and modding roles required Nicole to learn more specialized English language tied to her advancing modding skills. By accomplishing her varied roles in this affinity space, Nicole has had a chance to use and practice both everyday and specialized English with people all around the world in a setting with a strong atmosphere of belongingness. This affinity space and the people within it support and reinforce Nicole's varied goals and interests, which ultimately accelerated her English language learning.

**On-demand and just-in-time.** One of Gee's (2003) learning principles from video games is explicit information "on-demand and just-in-time." It again highlights the importance of employing learning moments. In other words, the best moment of learning is when people or tools provide information, answers, or support when learners want and need them. The Internet is a space where people can access communication and information anytime, from anywhere. This unique communicational condition creates the possibility of fast responses from people all over the world, 24/7, that could provide real-time learning and language practice. To better understand the range of communication in this affinity space, I analyzed the reviews of Nicole's posts and replies to threads that she started. Because Nicole is such a prolific poster, I focused on threads in which I could easily trace interactions.

As referenced above, I collected threads started by Nicole and compiled information about each thread including forum, number of views and replies, and how many times another user responded (Table 1). Nicole initiated 163 threads by October 2, 2011 and got 6,297 replies and 1,467, 567 views. The mean number of replies for each thread is 38.63. In other words, whenever Nicole initiated the conversation, she got at least 38 responses from others and had that many chances to practice her English. Among these, Nicole had more replies to the threads on social groups than threads related to modding and content creations.

Table 1

*Threads started by Nicole and summary of views and replies*

Topics of thread	Thread	View	Replies	Mean number of replies each topic
Social groups	57	134,288	4,368	76.63
Creations	93	1,323,236	1,846	19.84
Others	13	10,043	83	6.38

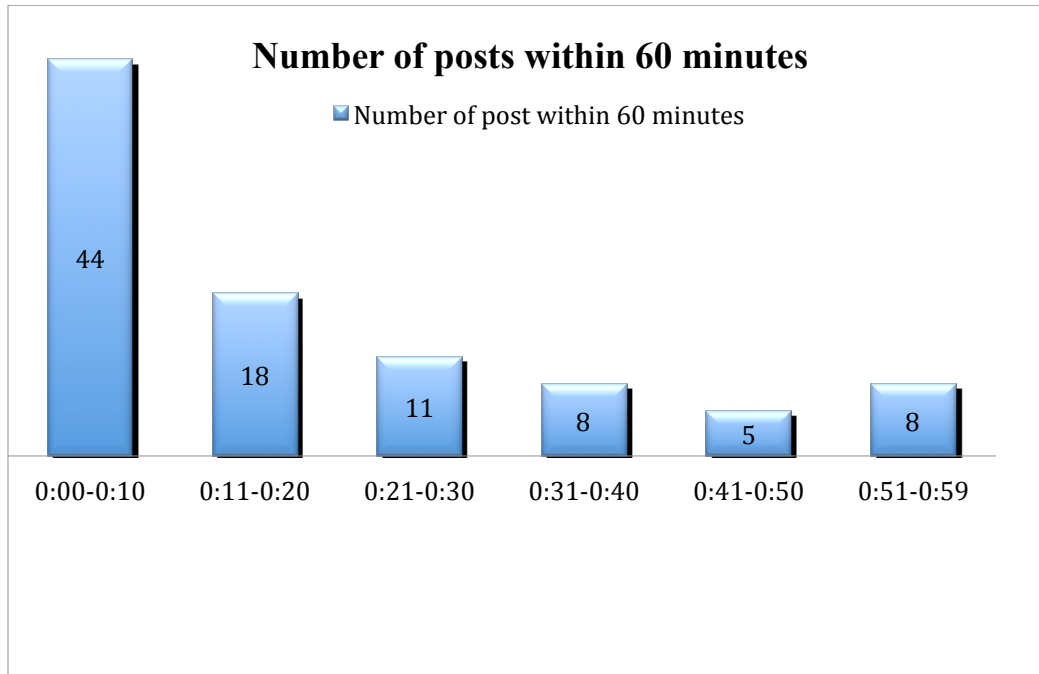
Social groups are a place to create groups and to discuss other topics that may not fit in the general forum structure. Based on its intentions, communication styles and language usage in social groups are more intimate and related to everyday English. Some thread titles even show the expected language practices related to Nicole’s personal affairs such as “Pics from Our Cities,” “I’m the happiest person!!,” “My college...,” “Twilight 4ever!!!,” and “Happy B-Day Nico!!!!” She shared her real life including where she lived and what she was interested in and made friends and celebrated their birthdays in social groups. She interacted and communicated about everyday events in English, which provided opportunities to practice and acquire everyday English on-demand. Whenever she wanted to talk and share her life or interests, she had people who were willing to listen to her and to share their interests and life with her in this affinity space that resembles daily interactions in a native, English-speaking family. This relaxed atmosphere provided practice for her English in an environment with a

low affective filter (Krashen, 1994), which lowered her anxiety about communicating in English.

**The promptness of responses.** While language in social groups is more connected to everyday English, threads related to her creations are more related to specialist English. She initiated 93 threads for creations and received approximately 20 comments for each creation. The detailed analysis of comments about creations will be discussed in the next section. In this section, I focus on the volumes and speed of responses in general. Briefly, the comments for creations are consistent with tailored advice given to help her improve her creations rather than for cheering her up about her personal affairs. Each comment pertaining to Nicole's creations contained different suggestions that were presented to Nicole with various forms of language practice related to three-dimensional modding. Through these technically focused interactions, Nicole improved her knowledge of and skills with three-dimensional modding, on-demand and practiced specialized language at the same time.

Another benefit of this unique learning process within and the interactions in MTS is the fast response time from various users with different comments. To demonstrate the promptness of responses, I calculated the time between each thread that Nicole started and the first response from other users. Among 163 threads analyzed, only four were dismissed from the data set because of a lack of response. These threads included a report on a site problem, an announcement about her own website, and a request to look at her journal. I could not access one thread on one social group because I was not a member. Except these four

threads, I compared the date and time between 159 original threads and their first-responses. Among 159 first-responses, 94 threads got a first-response within one hour; 56 threads within 24 hours; and seven threads within 10 days. Within the 94 first-responses within an hour, more than 45 percent were posted within ten minutes (Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* Shows the response times among 94 threads for technical comments.

This fast-responding system involving various users creates a very active learning environment that could instantly cover any topic or skill related to modding. Through these immediate responses, Nicole could get answers just-in-time and on-demand in moments to quickly solve her problems and move to the next step in her learning process. Additionally, these prompt responses from so many users create a unique learning environment in which a learner asking questions provokes responses from many teachers and knowledge providers. This

is in contrast to the learning setting typical of schools in which one teacher and many learners are in one classroom. So many prompt responses from various users also not only allows Nicole to promptly solved her problems and progress her skills quickly, but she developed a sense of affiliation through her exposure to diverse specialist language usages from numerous language providers.

### **Linguistic Elements**

In this section, I focus on the linguistic elements of Nicole's language learning and identify specialized words and patterns of language usage in comments from advanced members about Nicole's creations. The main goal of analyzing others' comments is to distinguish language practices in this specific modding context that Nicole must master to become a skilled modder. To illustrate the progress of Nicole's specialist language acquisition, I compared her earliest and most recent comments to those of other creators. The purpose of the comparison is to evaluate the developments of her discourse as a popular eye creator.

**Comments from advanced members.** When Nicole uploaded her creations in the Creator Feedback Forum to get feedback from advanced users, she got tailored comments depending on her creation and its quality. From these comments, she was exposed to certain words and expressions related to using *Adobe® Photoshop®*, *Sims Bodyshop*, and body parts, in general, depending on her skills and knowledge levels. These comments enhanced not only her modding abilities, but also her understanding of specialist language, written English words,

and expressions used within the contextualized situations of modding and *Sims* in general (Gee, 2004). To demonstrate her understanding of specialist language and application of comments from others, I present screenshots of Nicole's progress in content creation.

As I described above, Nicole uploaded nine *Sims 2* creations in the Creator Feedback Forum. She got 232 comments from 51 different users from January 29, 2009 to June 17, 2009 (See Table 2 for more detailed information).

Table 2

*Description of replies Nicole got for nine creations over eight months*

Creations	Date (2009)	Number					
		Total replies	Nicole's replies	Other users			Other comments: positive reinforcement/questions
				who gave advice	who gave detailed advice	who gave less detailed advice	
Eyes	January 29	11	4	5	3	2	0
Eyes	March 17	61	27	23	6	7	10
Face	March 20	9	3	4	2	2	0
Face/ outfit	April 1	197	58	13	8	3	2
Eyelines/ mascara	April 4	31	16	6	2	3	1
T-Shirts	April 18	7	3	3	1	2	0
Face	May 20	21	9	5	3	2	0
Eyeliner/ mascara	June 6, 2009	15	7	6	2	3	1
Eye shadows	June 17	12	5	2	1	1	0
Total		364	132		28		

As Table 2 shows, Nicole got various comments from many different users.

Detailed advice contained highly skilled suggestions for using *Adobe®*

*Photoshop®* and *Sims Bodyshop* as well as advice about taking better screenshots

which requires using the camera in the game effectively or the download and

import software in the game. One example of detailed advice that Nicole received

was is “it looks like you layered a bucketfill color over the iris and lowered the

opacity,” which contains more specialist language compared to less detailed



suggestions. Less detailed input mostly included simple suggestions such as “The red seems a bit too bright. Maybe try tweaking her lips to make her more unique?” Although the advice also helped Nicole improve her creations, she needed to figure out how to implement the advice by herself or ask more questions to actualize the information. She also needed to understand how certain words and expressions are applied differently in modding situations in order to accomplish what advanced users suggested and finally improve her modding skills. The specialist language acquisition naturally comes along when she was doing with language. Other comments including those for positive reinforcement and questioning were not highly related to modding but more everyday English similar to language practices in social groups. All these comments facilitated the enhancement of Nicole’s modding skills and language usages in everyday and specialist. To understand Nicoles specialized English language practices, I present some of the detailed recommendations that Nicole received.

**Detailed advice.** Nicole posted a set of six gothic eyes on January 29, 2009 that were of six different colors.



*Figure 4.* Example 1 (of six) gothic eye creations by Nicole.

After she posted this set, she got seven replies from five people, and she replied four times to ask more questions or to provide changes with screenshots. Among these comments were three detailed posts that contained more specialist language, which gave specific guidance to improve her creations. Most of the detailed advice shown in Table 2 contains a similar amount of specialist language and high level of technical knowledge. I use these three examples to illustrate usage of specialist language and depth of technical information. The first comment, from user Sweet (pseudonym), suggests:

It looks like you layered a bucketfill color over the iris and lowered the opacity. I can tell because the small white dot of reflected light changes color with the rest of it. That should always be white.

Which graphics program are you using? Do you know if it has a multiply blending option? I think using that would help.

Also, they look a little blurry. I can't tell if it's just because the picture was taken too far away to see the detail, or if it's lacking detail because of the image you used. Is there any way you can take a super close-up shot of the eyes?

In this comment, Nicole needed to understand specific specialist language and expressions to comprehend this comment properly. These include: “layered;” “bucketfill color;” “iris;” “lowered the opacity;” “reflected light;” “graphic program;” “a multiply blending option;” “blurry;” “the image you used;” and “super close-up shot” in these two short paragraphs.

**Providing proper information.** Sweet asked for the clarification “which graphics program are you using?”, because the process of using the “multiply blending option” is specific to the graphic programs. The commonly used graphic programs among MTS users are *Adobe® Photoshop®*, which users need to buy, and *GIMP*, which is free software. Sweet’s question shows the importance of providing the proper information for other members in order to get better guidance; also, it exemplifies the level of developing MTS discourse. Hayes and Lee (in press) contend that one important element of mastering specialist language is understanding the subject matter to know what and how information should be presented when asking questions. Nicole had to learn what information she should provide to others to get the tailored responses she wanted, such as providing the name of the photo-editing software she used.

Nicole also learned she had to take a better screenshot because her picture was too blurry for advanced users to check the detail of her creations as well as

understand the different file formats of images because some image formats lose detail and clarity when saved. For example, the JPEG format sacrifices detail to reduce the file size while other formats, such as PNG, does not lose detail. Thus, the expression of “the image you used” might indicate that Nicole should check the file format and challenges her understanding of the underlying meaning of “image” in the context of computer graphics. Further, Nicole needed to comprehend not only one meaning of text, which pertained to taking a better screenshot but also possible underlying suggestions—checking image file format—which only a person who is familiar with this kind of language in this modding context could pick up on.

One comment from an advanced member suggested that she should review the content of one link, which describes the quality and detail of eye creation, in order to understand the expectations applied to the screenshot in her earlier post. This person provided the link for the screenshot (See Figure 5) following the norm in MTS. Advanced members generally provide links to resources when they refer to them, making it easier for novice members to locate the original resource with one click. Users in MTS employ visuals and links as another way of communication and teaching (Kress, 2003). In this three-dimensional, graphic community, visuals can convey clearer meanings and teaching than written explanations.

It is important in MTS culture to use visuals and provide actual information such as links. This helps beginners understand what MTS members

expect. Further, images have their own value in this three-dimensional arena and are the best way to teach because they demonstrate the desired outcome.



*Figure 5.* A suggested example for Nicole.



*Figure 4.* Example 1 (of six) gothic eye creations by Nicole.

When viewing the two screen shots in Figures 3 and 4, it is easy to compare the differences of detail in the delicacy of eye creations and clarity of the screenshots. Nicole can easily visualize the explanations of Sweet's comment "It looks like you layered a bucketfill color over the iris and lowered the opacity. I can tell because the small white dot of reflected light changes color with the rest of it," and "Also, they look a little blurry. I can't tell if it's just because the picture was taken too far away to see the detail, or if it's lacking detail because of the image you used." She also learned that adequate screen quality and detail is necessary for other users to make appropriate evaluations and provide advice on the best practices for using visuals effectively. Through these kinds of interactions, Nicole was able to familiarize herself with unique and appropriate language usages such as articulating questions with proper information and appropriately using visuals to recruit advice specifically meant to improve her creations instead of exchanging comments for clarification of background information.

**Everyday language used in specialized situations.** Another element of mastering specialist language requires an understanding of everyday language depending on a particular situation. The words “layered,” “blurry,” and “iris” are used commonly in everyday life, compared to “lowered the opacity,” “reflected light,” and “multiply blending option.” Nevertheless, these everyday phrases are used differently in this context. The word “layered” is used in photo-editing programs. The dictionary definition (Dictionary.com) of “layer” is “a thickness of some material laid on or spread over a surface.” However, in this context, layer is a function to edit photos that stack one image on the top of another image. It is similar to using clear cellophane on the top of a picture to paint or draw something, and to lay it over the picture. Users can apply several layers, or “cellophanes” over the original picture and can change the order of cellophanes. The final picture will appear as all layers on the top of the original picture. It is the function of layering in photo-editing programs. Nicole needed to understand the fundamental usage of layering and the “bucketfill color” options. Nicole uses *Adobe Photoshop®*. In *Adobe Photoshop®*, bucketfill color is a very simple to use. Nicole chose a layer and a color, then used the bucketfill function from the “edit” in the toolbar (See Figure 6). It takes only three clicks to fill the color compared to using the “multiply blending option.”

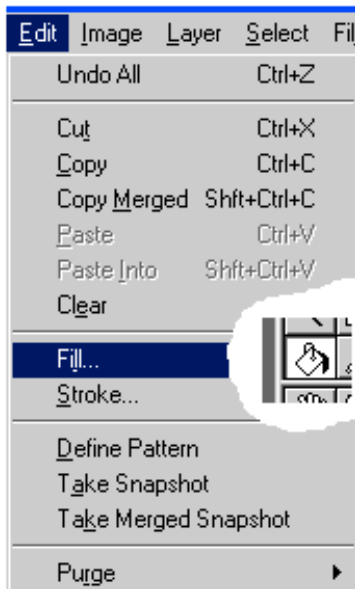


Figure 6. Screenshot for the process of using Bucketfill color option.

To use the “multiply blending option,” Nicole needed to figure out where this function is located, because this function is not as simple as Bucketfill color option. And the steps for using the multiply blending option are very complicated. Figure 7 demonstrates how complex the program is to use; and how this complexity is multiplied for Nicole, because she is an L2 English speaker using software written in English. To become a proficient modder, Nicole needed to become an advanced *Adobe Photoshop*® user, which in turn, required her to become an advanced user of a specialist language in English. It is because *Adobe Photoshop*® is an advanced graphic design and photo editing software program that that Nicole needed to acquire more advanced language.

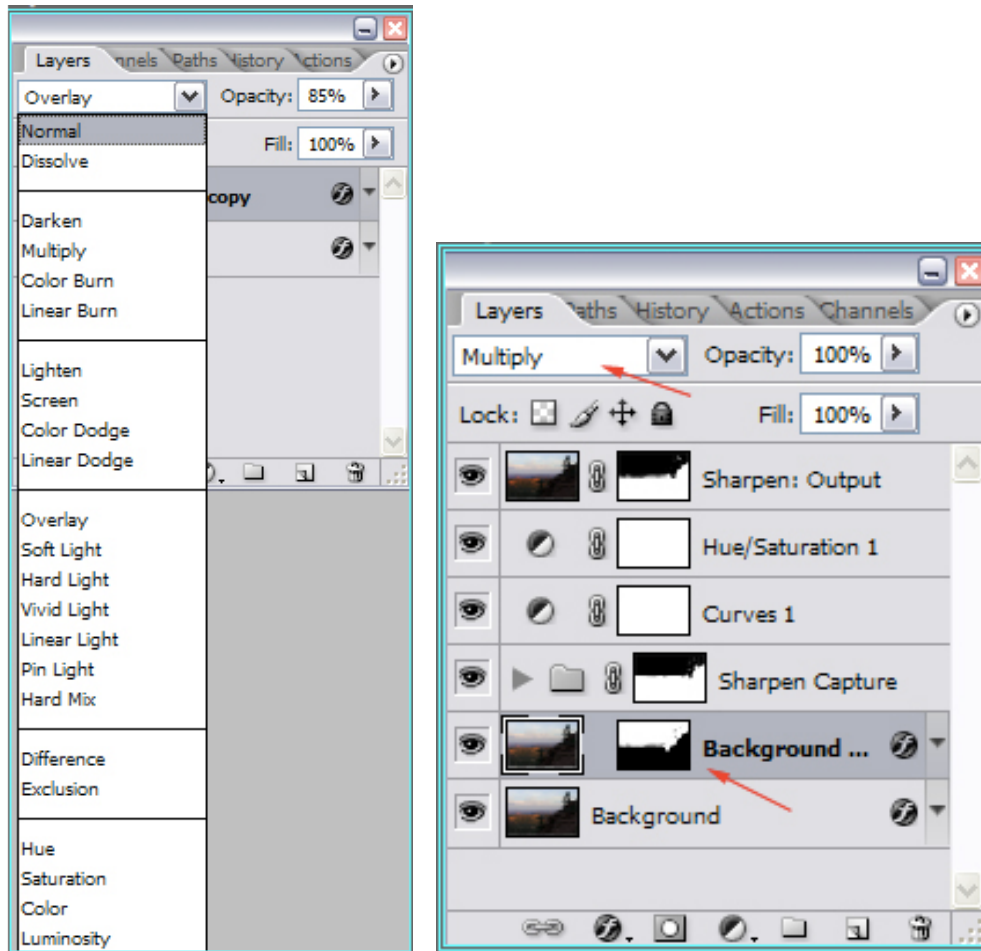


Figure 7. Screenshot for using multiply blending option in *Adobe Photoshop*<sup>2</sup>.

Another comment in the thread connected with Sweet's comment is from DM (pseudonym) about the reflections of light on the white dot in the eye of Nicole's creation. DM added the following comment to support Sweet's suggestion and provided more explanation why Sweet's suggestion will help Nicole to create better eyes with more expression:

I think if you try the white shine on them, as [sweet] said, they may look better. I think if they've got that shine and reflection in the eyes, It can make them look deeper, which I presume is what you're going for.

<sup>2</sup> Screenshot from <http://ronbigelow.com/articles/blend1/blend1.htm>



Sweet gave many complicated comments related to *Adobe Photoshop*®, but she did not explain the reason why she pointed out reflection. In this quote, DM offered another explanation for why Nicole should modify the reflection—to create a “deeper” look in the eye. Providing high-technology advice to beginners is a valued practice in MTS. In some instances, however, an MTS user is not explicit with their advice, such as when Sweet mentioned the deeper look in the eye but did not explain how Nicole could achieve this. Thus, DM supported Sweet’s comments by providing the ways in which Nicole could accurately enhance her creation. In this way, users view each other’s comments and build on knowledge that previous commentators provided. Thus, the reciprocal nature of modding culture reinforces the exchange of ideas, knowledge, and the comradely that is generated when advice and suggestions are shared.

To become an expert modder, Nicole was required to learn more complicated functions in *Adobe Photoshop*® such as adjusting the angle of the light and degree of radius or changing blend modes, style of overlay, style of shadow, size of brushes, size of diameter, and more. Nicole became determined in her application of the possible choices and functions of *Adobe Photoshop*®, which ultimately allowed her to make better eyes. Even with only these two comments, Nicole got what she needed to develop an understanding of specialist language to master *Adobe Photoshop*®. By accomplishing these tasks, she became familiar with even more specialist language related to *Adobe Photoshop*® in these situational contexts. All 28 detailed recommendations contained similar

or higher levels of information and specialist language to the comments from Sweet and DM. Nicole also followed others' comments and uploaded modified creations that incorporated their comments. Through these interactions, Nicole became accustomed to MTS culture, which further facilitated her interaction and support network in addition to exposing her to various patterns of specialist language from many different people. Through the process of actualizing advice from others, Nicole quickly acquired specialist language in English from advanced MTS modders.

**Various forms of specialist language.** As Nicole's *Adobe Photoshop*® skills progressed, she also learned how to communicate with others using visuals. In this three-dimensional modding site, visuals, and text are very important methods of communication (New London Group, 1996; Kress, 2003). Frequently beginners receive requests to take a better picture from advanced users who want to provide more tailored advice. Like most beginners, Nicole commonly received comments from advanced users to take bigger or clearer pictures. In the first example from Sweet, she asked "Is there any way you can take a super close-up shot of the eyes?" because the low quality of the screenshot hindered the ability of others to provide specific suggestions. Another user, Jay (pseudonym), helped Nicole to become better at using a camera in *The Sims* game and "Create-A-Sim."

You could always just get a camera hack and zoom up real close (even in Create-A-Sim)... Anyway, I like the eyes, including the coloured reflections, which I think makes them look more Gothic in a way, like she's standing in a darkened room, contemplating death...

He recommended that Nicole get “a camera hack” and use the zoom up function. According to the Free Dictionary (<http://www.thefreedictionary.com/>), “hack” is “to use one's skill in computer programming to gain illegal or unauthorized access to a file or network.” On the contrary, hacked programs are acceptable uses in MTS, because they do not attempt to maliciously affect *The Sims* portal. In MTS, hacked programs mostly add more functions onto the original *The Sims* games. The camera function in *The Sims 2* is not allowed to take super close shots, and it generally takes excessively dark screenshots, which hampers users’ abilities to see the details of others’ creations. By installing the “hacked” program, Nicole would be able to take better screen shots. Thus, she needed to understand the meaning of the word “hack” in this context, as well as find the right hack program. In her next creation, one and a half months later, Nicole uploaded a super close-up screenshot that was still too dark. Another advanced user provided a link to get a program for brightening up *Bodyshop* that would allow taking brighter screenshots.

Hmmm... Try this:  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=220884>  
It will let you see shadows and highlights way better.

If Nicole wanted to use this program, she needed to read the installation instructions, which are written by the program’s owner and contain different specialist language—not related to modding. Most installation instructions have other forms of specific languages and delicate liner steps (e.g., see Appendix C to check the installation instructions of the program). Nicole was exposed to specialist language not only from *Adobe Photoshop*® or *Sims Bodyshop*, but also

from sources with various other technical information and skills. Additionally, the process of acquiring specialist language was not only from these two channels—comments from users in MTS and instruction manuals for software programs—but also many links in the comments and other resources. These other resources are located both in and out of MTS and contain other types of specialist language depending on the topic being addressed. These multichannel and varied language practices helped Nicole to be better equipped with the appropriate technical knowledge and skills that allowed her to master varied specialist languages in English.

### **Don't Be Only a Language Consumer; Become a Language Producer**

Nicole was not just a passive language learner—just reading comments—but also was a very active language learner and producer from the beginning of her participation in MTS. To trace her language practice, I investigated Nicole's comments to other creators in *The Sims 2* Creator Feedback Forum. I found 245 comments Nicole posted from January 29, 2009, to August 29, 2010. Among 245 posts, Nicole wrote 72 comments on other users' posts and 173 comments on her own posts. The contents of these 72 comments range from positive reinforcement to detailed suggestions. This simple analysis demonstrates that Nicole actively practiced language in MTS to move from the role of language learner to language producer. To achieve a better understanding of her language improvements, I compare her early and late comments.

**Nicole's comments to another user.** Nicole gave a comment about a *Sim* creation on February 28, 2009.

I've uploaded a lot of sims and they have always been rejected, so I think they should be more unique... but this is only my opinion...

She wanted to help this person to make a better *Sim* face; however, her comment is very tentative and brief. It also does not provide any information about what she meant by “unique” or how this person could make the *Sim* unique. As Nicole stated, she got many rejections of her *The Sims* creation. When she posted her rejected *Sims* on her own Social forum, she got a very detailed explanation of the meaning of “unique” in *Sims* from another member, which included 1,047 words with detailed advice to her (See Appendix D for the full comment).

And finally, with your sim; what MTS2 means when they say it looks general is that it looks like a maxis template face. MTS2 is pretty damn exclusive about what sims they accept, especially adult female sims, if really any part of your sims face looks like maxis made it they won't upload it. If you want her uploaded she will need a face lift. I would have read of this.

In this short piece of advice, this member taught Nicole the importance of creating a *Sims* by changing the default face template *The Sims* game provided. Modders need to know all functions in the *Sims Bodyshop* to get rid of the Maxis template face. This demonstrates how Nicole received more information about how the word “unique” operates in the space. Even though Nicole got an in-depth explanation about unique *Sims*, she was not able to articulate the information about making *Sims* unique at that time. Slightly less than two months later in the Creator Feedback Forum on April 14, 2009, Nicole posted her comment to a new modder who had created a *Sim*. This later comment contained much more

detailed information and demonstrated language practices similar to those that she received from more advanced users. For example, Nicole introduced the specialist word “maxis default” to this newbie and provided links for visual examples that demonstrated the actual steps that would make the Sims more unique.

OK... first of all, she's got the maxis default face, you haven't changed it too much... Her superior lip should be wider and her nose thinner. The brows should be more arched and have other shape, you could try with helaene twized brows: (<http://www.helaene.com/brows.php>) The face is less long and I think about the hair the same that the other ones (try this link, it works for me): <http://www.noukiesims2.net>.

She was the first person who mentioned, “the maxis default face” in this thread. Compared to her prior comments to new users, this one portrayed a much more confident voice along with more detail about how to improve the *Sim* creation. Between the first comment and this comment, she initiated fourteen threads in the Creator Feedback Forum to others about Sims’ outfits, eyes, and lips. Prior to this, she only responded after others responded first, and her responses lacked detailed suggestions when she provided links and visual examples for beginner-modders.

Previously, Nicole had taken a position as a supporter strengthening others’ comments. Later, she became a proactive provider. The transformation from supporter to provider is commonly observed in the learning process among affinity spaces. Users and learners in these spaces act as pure consumers or inert supporters for a while until they assimilate and master its culture, allowing them to become confident about their abilities, knowledge, experiences, and skills.

Once this happens, the MTS users then become central participants and proactive providers. Nicole followed a similar path. In doing so, she presented herself based on her changing roles and the level of confidence in her knowledge and acculturation in MTS.

Another example is in the way that Nicole reapplied what she was learned from others is seen in the way that once she mastered a certain level of expertise, she was able to pass on the certain traits such as providing links to successful examples of visuals. In this comment from March 20, 2009, she provided a string of links.

OK... I've found a few eyes that could be better:  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=317685>  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=316148>  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=315830>  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=313910>  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=312093>  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=307952>  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=308103> (I think this is the most similar)  
For the nose you could use this:  
<http://www.modthesims2.com/download.php?t=303275>

Although this post shows that Nicole learned how to use the resources in MTS, she still had not learned to distinguish which links could be the best fit to improve the new user's creation. A comparison of the April 14, 2009 and the March 20, 2009 comments suggests that Nicole's language usage significantly progressed to become more complex and sophisticated. Nicole acquired training by using others' comments as models for language use and practice. She then incorporated this knowledge and language into her own comments to others. Nicole continued to create *The Sims 2* eyes and eye makeup. She even produced a tutorial, which

she posted on [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) on September 10, 2009. While she kept improving her skills in modding, she interacted with many users, received many comments, and eventually became a popular modder, because she was able to acquire specialist and everyday language in English.

One good example indicating the advanced level of Nicole's modding ability and her status in MTS are her YouTube tutorials. She also left comments, provided suggestions, shared her creations, and actively distributed her knowledge and skills. However, posts are only for individuals. When reaching out to the MTS community at large, modders frequently distribute their knowledge is by writing and posting tutorials. This is a common cultural trait among many affinity spaces. In the email interview, Nicole also mentioned that she read many tutorials to learn new skills not only from MTS but also other Sims' communities. She acquired the culture of distributing knowledge in affinity spaces. She took advantage of this culture, thus, she wanted to give back what she got from people in MTS (personal communication, January 31, 2011). She created visual tutorials to show the step-by-step process of creating eyes using *Adobe Photoshop*®. On July 21, 2010, in *The Sims 2* Creator Feedback Forum, one user even linked Nicole's YouTube tutorial to a new modder who was trying to improve eye texture.

Yea, your textures seem kinda blurry, but they look so much worse ingame because you have your settings on low.

Here is a WONDERFUL tutorial on how to make quick and clear eye textures.



<http://www.youtube.com/watch.....><sup>3</sup>

This comment shows that the quality of Nicole's tutorial is advanced enough to be helpful to others. Additionally, Nicole has developed several roles in MTS including Sims content creator (modder), social cheer-leader, guidance provider, advisor, site helper, and tutorial writer. All these roles enhance her language practices and ability in special and everyday English along with being familiar with the culture in MTS and mastering proper behaviors for each role.

One of Nicole's recent posts in *The Sims 2* Creator Feedback Forum on July 23, 2010, illustrates the growth of Nicole's language usage. She added her opinion after a person gave comments about eye creations by one beginning modder.

As V. said, you should move the corner of the eye a lil' bit to make it show up. Also, add a lot more of shading in the edges of the sclera. My sclera always looks really dark brown in photoshop but fine in the sim, a too light sclera makes the eye look cartoony. It would help too to add more shading on the top of the iris, making it almost black, in the upper 1/3 of the eye, blurring it where the third sparkle starts. A thin unfilled circle around the iris also helps for a more realistic look, being it darker at the top and lighter at the bottom. If you shade a lil' bit the sparkles at the top and add some eyelashes with the color of the shading, and add a small light with low opacity and crescent shape at the bottom it will look good too. Also, making the iris around the pupil darker helps to make it more realistic, and adding a different color in that zone too, green for example.

The length of this comment is much longer than the first comment posted on January 29, 2009. The length of the comment does not simply support the idea that Nicole's language ability improved. Rather, it is clear from her posts that she

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<sup>3</sup> I deleted part of the url so as not to disclose Nicole's identity

was able to present her opinions in English in increasing complexity demonstrating her depth of knowledge, variety in language usage, and ability to engage in specialist and everyday language. Further, Nicole demonstrated the expected cultural values in MTS when she gave advice to others. Although she still made some mistakes, indicating she was not a native English speaker, these mistakes did not interfere with communication or the delivery of her knowledge and contextual meaning, which is not easy to develop for ELLs. This indicates that her ability to use specialist English language and her confidence to express herself in English increased tremendously since she posted her first comment on February 28, 2009

Through many interactions with various users, Nicole improved her specialist and everyday English, which in turn allowed her to improve her eye creations and her understanding of modding software, which is written in English. For example, Nicole developed the linguistic ability to explain and give very detailed directions in English to help others improve their eye creations. Complex phrases that she learned to articulate with ease included “shading on the top of the iris;” “blurring it where the third sparkle starts;” “making it almost black in the upper 1/3 of the eye;” “a thin unfilled circle around the iris;” “being it darker at the top and lighter at the bottom;” and “add a small light with low opacity to make the iris around the pupil darker.” The depth of knowledge and detail directions such as “1/3 of the eye” contained in this comment represent Nicole’s improvement in specialist English language pertaining to the use of *Adobe Photoshop*®. Many times, Nicole got comments related to producing better

shading, lighting, blurring certain parts, correct opacity, and making eyes look deeper.

She could not have maintained this level of input with other users without mastering English. This further facilitated her renown in eye creations, eventually leading her to indirectly setting the standard for eye creations. She did this by not only providing a technical level of expertise, but through her mastery of specialty English and her ability to communicate socially at the same time, a key component of collaborating in online spaces. Instead of just saying, “it is not realistic,” Nicole suggested that the user utilize *Adobe Photoshop*® to make eyes that do not “look cartoony.” Although the word “cartoony” is not a real word, it fits perfectly in this context and sends a strong message regarding MTS expectations

Taking her English language practice to a new level, Nicole even modified her English by tailoring her comments depending on knowledge was needed. Her language patterns also delineate her ability to transfer knowledge that she learned from advanced members to newcomers. All these interactions with other users in her learning process allowed her to master English specialty and everyday languages, both technical and vernacular.

## **Discussion**

The analysis of Nicole’s English language learning through her participation in MTS strongly indicates that affinity spaces has a high potential to provide new platforms for studying E2L. Four main principles of the study have

been highlighted as key variables in the development of a second language—English—in affinity spaces: 1) [a] common endeavor is primary; 2) newbies, masters, and everyone else share [the] common space; 3) both intensive and extensive knowledge are encouraged; and 4) there are many different forms and routes to participation.

The analysis emphasized the importance of socializing in affinity spaces for Nicole, an English language learner. As noted above, Gee and Hayes (2010) described the importance of pursuing and keeping the specific goals, endeavors, and interests in affinity spaces in order to keep members' actively participating. They argue that when online affinity spaces emphasize socialization over other components such as common endeavors, that participants might leave because the nature of the site changes from technical to social. Thus, people have assumed that socialization plays a secondary role in affinity spaces. However, my finding has shown that at least some people need to feel comfortable without a lot of pressure to perform immediately, that they need to feel belongingness to the space, and have strong relationships among their online peers. I acknowledge there is the concern about the term “belonging.” I am not using it as sense people in affinity spaces are identified as membership. I use this term—belonging—to affiliate with other people in these spaces. For Nicole, socialization was the main portal of being in MTS at the early period. Further, it was her strong relationships that allowed her to continue taking her English practice to more advanced levels. Certainly, the advancement of her language skills were tied to her ability to simultaneously socialize and collaborate on ad hoc teams to solve technical

problems for MTS newcomers. In this context, socializing may have actually been key to her successes as it facilitated all else.

My analysis of Nicole's learning practices reveals the potential of affinity space to provide environments where language researchers can study the process of English language learning in real time. An affinity space where anybody can come and mingle with different levels of modders creates a rich environment for learners to have many teachers who provide diverse input in their learning. Unlike a traditional school setting where one teacher—knowledge expert and provider—and many students—knowledge consumers—at any one point in time, this unique space has one learner, and many teachers who can collaborate simultaneously or nearly so. Even though these advanced modders who are knowledge providers live in physically different places, the speed of responses and degree of the various comments provide a tremendously rich environment for ELLs.

This analysis of Nicole's language practices and interactions contributes to research in ways that enlighten our understanding of learning second languages by engaging in digital media. By participating in the affinity space, Nicole acquired exposure to many different varieties of English and different language patterns related to socializing and solving high-technology problems. Emersion in the affinity space allowed her to experience language usage beyond a typical classroom setting. Instead of sitting in an English language classroom with one teacher and many language learners, the ration is inverted in the affinity space where there is one learner and many teachers. Thus, in concluding this paper, I

hope educators realize the power of online affinity space in English language learning and envisage the potential of bringing these online resources into classroom learning.

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## CHAPTER 3

# DESIGN IS A COLLABORATIVE AND SHARED PRACTICE: A NEW PERSPECTIVE ON USER PARTICIPATION IN AN ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITY

### **Introduction**

Various scholars have studied participatory culture (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006) and affinity spaces (Gee, 2004), such as online fan communities. They have recognized that affinity spaces have important implications for learning and literacy development (Gee, 2003; 2004; 2010a; 2010b; Lammers, 2011), scientific reasoning (Steinkuehler, 2007; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008), historical understanding (Squire, 2004), technology learning (Hayes & King, 2009), information literacy (Martine & Steinkuehler, 2010), language learning (Black, 2008, 2009; Lam, 2004; Hayes & Lee, 2012) and economics (Castronova, 2002). At the same time, a growing volume of research has examined the relationship among learning in affinity spaces, participatory culture, and digital media among teenagers (Ito, 2010; Ito et al, 2010). Even though these scholars have studied learning in participatory cultures and affinity spaces, we do not know how these spaces are created and sustained and the roles and implications of users in these spaces.

This study evaluates an affinity space and the role of its participants in shaping it. Through understanding the role of participants, this study can bring a

new perspective on learners' roles in designing learning spaces such as curriculum or classroom. It is part of a larger ethnographic study that is influenced by theories of situated learning (Gee, 2004). In this paper, I reveal the design process of an online gaming community—*Mod The Sims* (MTS), which is devoted to three-dimensional game modification—and focus on various styles and levels of user participation. To illustrate a new perspective on user participation in this space, I investigated the development process of MTS by looking at users' influence on the site and their roles. I closely examined one site forum, *Site News*, in which administrators announced creators' news, technical news, site rules, and site changes, among others in order to illustrate a pattern of user participation in creating this affinity space. I utilized different theoretical perspectives of user participation—the so called participatory design (PD)—from several disciplines including instructional design in education in order to better understand the roles of various users and the implications of user participation in the design process of MTS.

### **Literature Review of User Participation**

Theoretical perspectives that describe patterns of user participation in affinity spaces have rarely been examined. For an exception, see Gee and Hayes's (2010) work that describes the various modes of user involvement. Consequently, I rely on design process theory (Baek, Cagiltay, & Frick, 2008; Fischer & Scharff, 2000; Gustafson & Branch, 1997; Kensing & Blomberg, 1998; Liang, Chou, Hsu & Young, 2009; Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2011;

Schuler & Namioka, 1993; Sanders & Stapper, 2008; Smith & Ragan, 1999; Urban & von Hippel, 1988) to illuminate the relationship between user participation and learning in MTS. First, I inquired into the process of PD. The main concept of PD is that it creates a place for *end-users* who is using the complete products in the design process to facilitate users' input from the design onset (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998; Schuler & Namioka, 1993). The concept of PD originated in 1960s and 1970s Scandinavian work models that recognized "an explicit commitment to workplace democracy in the context of technological growth and business development" (Muller & Kuhn, 1993, p.27). In these models, the product designers invited workers' participation in design activities and decision processes. This original movement of user empowerment and democratization has influenced various fields of design process, such as software, urban design, product, and instructional design. In the United States, this influence is most apparent in "the design and instruction of computer-based systems at work" (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998, p.167). Currently, "the participation of the intended users in technology design is [pervasively] seen as one of the preconditions for good design" (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998, p.172). To better understand the learning implications of the PD movement, I elucidate four different perspectives on user participation in several disciplines. These are 1) worker's roles in early PD study and patterns of user participation in 2) product design, 3) technology design, and 4) instructional design. By examining user participation in various disciplines, I hope to gain a better understanding of user participation patterns in MTS.

## **Workers/Users in Participatory Design**

In the traditional design process, consumers, especially workers in industrial model, did not have any particular role as partners in the design process, nor were their abilities and knowledge valued in the development phase.

According to Cross (1972) “[even though] professional designers in every field have failed in their assumed responsibility to predict and to design-out the adverse effects of their projects” (as cited in Sanders & Stapper, 2008, p. 7), workers were expected to take passive roles as users of the end products. Compared to these traditional roles of workers in industrial model, workers in PD take active roles in: 1) analyzing needs and possibilities of outcomes; 2) evaluating and selecting technological components; 3) designing new technologies; and 4) managing organizational implementation (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998). PD has two main expectations of workers: 1) establishing required conditions for cooperating among workers and designers within an organization by developing and evaluating design practices, which is referred to as process oriented; 2) designing and evaluating systems to support the organization’s activities, which are referred to as product oriented (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998). According to Kensing and Blomberg (1998), workers benefit from systems that fit their needs. Based on goals and roles of workers in user participation, workers expect to be active partners in the design process, creating and constructing end products together from “the moment of idea generation” (Sanders & Stappers, 2008, p.8). This new perspective in the design of projects, products, systems, or technologies proposes

new interactions, roles, and practices for users as co-designers or co-creators in the process of design.

### **User Participation in Product Design**

According to Sanders and Stappers (2008), the concept of co-design is from business and marketing, rather than from the field of design. Eric von Hippel, who specializes in economics of distributed and open innovation, suggested treating users as market researchers who can provide real world needs or solutions (Urban & von Hippel, 1988). He proposed the idea of “lead users” who have unique needs that will become popular at future marketplaces (Urban & von Hippel, 1988). In other words, lead users think far enough ahead—compared to the majority of users—that their knowledge and experience can identify important market trends. Based on the understanding of mass-manufacture markets, many users do not find what they want on the market; thus, they are willing to pay to get precisely what they want (Franke, von Hippel, & Schreier, 2006). Users even “innovate [so] that they can develop exactly what they want, rather than relying on manufacturers as their agents” (von Hippel, 2005, p.1). He emphasized the empowerment of users through participation in manufacturing and in business. However, even his suggestions and the notion of lead users in the manufacturing process limit the degree of user participation to users who are an “elite and very carefully selected group of people” (Sanders & Stapper, 2008, p.8). These elite groups of people cannot represent the majority of people.

Frank Piller, an expert on the value of company-consumer co-creation, illustrated the value of consumer participation in the process of what he called “mass customization” (Piller, Moeslenin, & Stotko, 2004). He defined the values of customers as co-designers who are “defining, configuring, matching, or modifying an individual solution” (Piller, 2004, p. 315) depending on individuals’ needs. He emphasized the difficulty fulfilling each consumer’s demand without their deep involvement. His example of customers’ deep involvement in the design process relates to a customized shoe design by each user who designs his/her own details. After customers design their own shoes, manufacturers produce individualized products and deliver them to each customer. Even though consumers in mass customization rely less on manufacturers as their agents by developing their own agency for their products, all operations are processed within a “stable solution space,” which von Hippel (2001) defined as “the pre-existing capability and degrees of freedom built into a given manufacture’s production system” (p.251). In this system, consumers design their own products within a fixed solution space where manufacturers create the product, but have some flexible and responsive processes (Piller, 2004). This system represents the limitations of user participation in manufacturing process. Even though consumers have their own agency in their products, they are only able to participate within fixed solution spaces and a limited degree of participation. They are not allowed to participate in or become a co-designer, which is the core of the manufacturing systems. Consumers’ freedom is controlled by the designed world—a stable solution space—which is similar to freedom of players’ choices



within the game systems (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004). Within games, players have various choices for solving problems on their own, and they feel like they have freedom to make their own decisions. However, games have their own rules and systems. Players only have sets of choices, and they make decisions that are limited by the system. Thus, designers of manufacturing systems or games already control and set the degrees of freedom and possible choices for consumers and players.

### **User Participation in Technology Design**

While user participation in business involves innovations in the manufacturing and design process that adopt consumers' creativity in order to satisfy consumers' needs, user participation in technological design relies on users' knowledge and input to narrow the gap between design and use time. According to Fischer (2003), there are gaps between the times when "system designers create environments and tools" and when "users" or "stakeholders" use the system (p.88). Users will discover gaps in the support system, because designers cannot deduce all possible problems and anticipate users' needs at the time of design (Fischer & Scharff, 2000). Traditionally, system designers and developers make decisions regarding environments and tools based on their understanding of users' needs and problems. They then modify their systems to fit the users' needs after the system has been released. Further, users do not typically participate in the decision making process during the development phase. Thus, designers do not know what users needs are and how to solve the corresponding problems. User

participation starts after the whole process of development is over, at which point users can hardly change the main systems or tools.

The consequences of the Internet on development, of its embeddedness in human interactions, and its function create and foster a culture of user participation in many ways. Examples include Youtube, open-source software (OSS), and Wikis. The results of open, user participation create new patterns of involvement, as well as expectation from users. Additionally, “participatory design” recognizes the importance of user involvement at the outset of design. These technically supportive environments accelerate the tendency for developers and users to work together to create a system and to envision new contexts of use, as well as the importance of flexibility and user involvement in software development, such as open source software (OSS). Open-source software embarks on a new era of developing systems with high, user participation based on users’ own needs and abilities. Users can also change segments of the developed system depending on their needs and contexts.

However, even though OSS has incredible benefits and flexibilities, it faces serious difficulties. When people make too many modifications in order to meet specifications for their own needs, the new version of the software may not work in a different context, which makes sharing difficult (Fischer & Scharff, 2000). Thus, OSS commonly has “a centralized authoritative version of a system” (Fischer & Scharff, 2000, p.4). An individual or a group controls this core version. In other words, users can build their own system based on the core version, but they cannot modify the core. This core-control management creates

the boundaries, degrees, or limitations of user participation until the core individual or group agrees to adopt a modification as part of the core system. In addition, users and designers in open source communities are typically already highly skilled programmers (Fischer & Giaccardi, 2006). Even though OSS has limitations, it is a major contribution to a design system that is not mainly focused on the final solutions; it is about creating software that can be changed and modified at the time of use by users (Fischer & Scharff, 2000, p.4).

Fischer and his colleagues proposed the notion of “meta-design” (2000, p.396) and “culture of participation” (2009, p.3), which suggests that developing a software for creating a system is an ongoing process and that users are co-designers throughout the whole process, not only at the time of design (Fischer, 2003). Meta-design shares some core objectives with user-centered and PD approaches. Both user-centered design and PD approaches emphasize user participation from the beginning of design time, which narrows the gap between design and use time. In spite of valuing users’ roles in the design process, neither approach considers systems as “living entities which can be evolved by their users” (Fisher, 2003, p. 2). Fischer and his colleagues expand the notion of system design and users’ role in their meta-design approach. In the meta-design approach, users become co-designers not only at design time, but also as part of the working system. Meta-design also interprets systems as seeds that can grow and change throughout the system’s life. Within meta-design, researchers have proposed the seeding, evolutionary growth, and reseeded (SER) process model (Fischer & Ostwald, 2002). Seeding is the initial step to build a seed that can

evolve over time, instead of building the complete systems at once. This seed is an initial collection of knowledge in an information space consisting of developers and users. Evolutionary growth is the process and period it takes for users to figure out a problem. Throughout this evolutionary growth, the seed—initial collected knowledge—provides information for problem solving and generating new information from each problem solution to the seed. Reseeding is the period in which users “organize, formalize, and generalize information and artifacts” (Fischer & Ostwald, 2002, p.2) developed during the evolutionary growth phase. Throughout the whole SER model, developers manage systems, information space, and its modifications. Users participate from seeding to reseeding, because only they can judge the value of information and structures that they will use in real practices.

Fischer and Scharff (2000) defined meta-design as “design for designers” (p.396). They used the word “designer” in a broader sense, which is “a person who wishes to act as an active participant and contributor in personally meaningful activities” (2000, p.3). It is not used to mean a person who has the power of decision making over the process of design. By participating in the process of meta-design, users have the opportunities, tools, and personal satisfaction that fit their needs. This important contribution of meta-design “has shifted some *control* from designer to users” (Fischer & Giaccardi, 2006, p. 430) and has empowered users. Even though meta-design advocates understand systems and design as a fluid and flexible process, meta-design has many technical and social challenges. Some challenges include “the willingness of

users to engage in additional learning to become designers” and “the need for a new, integrated design space that brings together the design of both technical and social conditions” (Fischer & Giaccardi, 2006, p. 454), which are already present in MTS. I will explain how MTS provides the space that facilitates the technical and social conditions for design in the findings section.

### **User Participation in Instructional Design**

Instructional design is related more closely to educational contexts than the prior design models, such as product or technological design, that I have discussed. Like the design process in other disciplines, traditional instructional design follows very linear and bureaucratic methods (Baek, Cagiltay, & Frick, 2008; Gustafson & Branch, 1997; Smith & Ragan, 1999; Liang et al, 2009; Morrison, Ross, Kalman, & Kemp, 2011). Classic instructional design models are variations of the ADDIE model: analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation (Gustafson & Branch, 1997; Cennamo & Kalk, 2004). In the ADDIE model, designers analyze contexts and learners’ needs; they create a set of specifications for an effective, efficient, and relevant environment; they develop materials for all learners and for the management of instruction; and they evaluate the results of the design. Many traditional, instructional development models miss an important element—the learner—in their design process. According to Morrison et al. (2011), lack of learners’ involvement in the instructional design process creates a lack of understanding of learners’ needs and their goals of learning.

Recently, scholars in instructional design have put more emphasis on the learner. Gustafson and Branch (1997) pointed out that instructional design should be learner-centered, goal-oriented, and empirical; and it should focus on real-world performance and outcomes that can be measured. They emphasized the characteristics that should be promoted in all instructional design. Building on their work, more scholars promoted the importance of learners in the process of design (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009; Liang et al, 2009), and some scholars even view the design process more holistically as a spiral model (Cennamon & Kalk, 2004) instead of a linear process.

Dick, Carey, and Carey (2009) also proposed the idea that “the instructor, learners, materials, instructional activities, delivery system, and learning and performance environments interact and work with each other to bring about desired learning outcomes” (p.1). Additionally, they reconceptualized their understanding of “system” and “instructional process” in the instructional design field. They look at a system as active, changeable, and flexible rather than fixed and rigid. They also suggested the idea of viewing the instructional process as “a system whose purpose is to bring about learning. The components of the system are the learners, the instructor, the instructional materials, and the learning environments, all interacting to achieve the goal” (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009, p. 2). Their perspective of looking at systems differently is very similar to the idea of meta-design. Both perspectives look at design processes as dynamic and flexible rather than static and linear. To take instructional design as a dynamic and flexible process, Cennamo and Kalk (2004) proposed a cyclical model that

has five phases of instructional design: define; design; demonstrate; develop; and deliver (p.6). Based on their model, designers work with clients, team members, and instructors, as well as learners, in each phase. When designers move through these five phases, all these people dedicate themselves to leading a progressively more complete version of the design outcome. Thus, they view design as a collaborative practice rather than a bounded professional practice controlled only by designers.

Even though these scholars emphasize the importance of involving learners in the instructional design process, degrees and levels of learners' participation are very limited and selectively controlled by designers. In both cases, learners in their models are selected by designers and considered to be representative learners (Cennamon & Kalk, 2004) or student groups (Dick, Carey, & Carey, 2009). Dick et al. (2009) stated that designers need to determine the details of student groupings. Cennamon and Kalk (2004) emphasized the importance of understanding learners' characteristics that can impact the instructional strategies. They also suggested that the first step should be to determine what learners already know and what they need to know. Designers in both models controlled the ways, degrees, and levels of learners' participation depending on designers' needs.

In summary, designers try to promote user participation in design processes in various disciplines that I described above. However, the role of the learner/user/participant is controlled and limited by the designer. One reason for this is, of course, practicality, since someone has to put together all the input and

make decisions about how to create coherent products, systems, or instructions; as well as designers are not familiar with the notion of sharing their power and leadership to facilitate more active and different levels of user participation rather than expecting limited users' opinions and knowledge. In this paper, I argue that the patterns of user participation, and interactions among MTS administrative staff and users illustrate a new form of user participation through sharing power and leadership.

### **Theoretical Perspective**

This study is grounded in a sociocultural perspective on learning and literacy (Vygotsky, 1986; Gee, 1997; 2010). Sociocultural theory stresses learning and knowledge as processes that occur as a result of participation in socially and culturally constructed and situated contexts. Learning can be viewed as the process in which members become able to participate in a community and show their understanding through talk, text, experiences, identity affiliation, and use of resources (Cazden, 1988; Gee, 2004; Heath, 1983; Ochs & Shieffelin, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). I also employ Lave and Wenger's concept of "communities of practice" which frames "learning as increasing participation in communities of practice concerns the whole person acting in the world" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.49). They state that "participation is always based on situated negotiation and renegotiation of meaning" (1991, p.51).

I also employ Gee's (2004) concept of an "affinity space" as a theoretical framework to understand how MTS facilitates a new form of user participation.



The purpose is to understand user participation in MTS and the process of negotiation and renegotiation of meaning and recreation of the site as a whole as well as its implications for instructional design as collaborative work.

### **Affinity Space**

Affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) are common and important interactional places. In this high-technology era, they are often found online. People interact in affinity spaces sharing “common interests and endeavors” (p.85), which enables them to overcome the effect and influences of more traditional, social dividers or barriers. Sharing common endeavors and interests facilitates strong relationships among certain people; however, emphasizing a space rather than membership opens up the possibility for participants to have various degrees of affiliation. Newbie, masters, and everyone else can meet and interact in these online spaces where they share their interests, goals, knowledge, and skills.

Another defining character of affinity space is the promotion of user participation in which both intensive (specialized knowledge) and extensive (less specialized knowledge) is shared and valued. An environment that welcomes masters, newbies, and everyone else creates opportunities for anyone to share not only valuable knowledge but also simple opinions related to shared interests and endeavors (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006). Various kinds of knowledge are expected among different levels of knowledge holders.

One more theoretical characteristic that is related to user participation is that leaders are resources rather than “bosses.” In affinity spaces, the roles and

expectations of leaders and followers are “porous” and vague because followers—as players, members, or users in an affinity space—are not only taking on roles of traditional pure followers as consumers, but they also act as producers by generating content too. Becoming a proactive producer is tied to another characteristic of affinity spaces, and there are many different forms and routes to participation. For example, followers can become administrative staff, which allows them to have a leaders’ role. Not all followers want to assume a leadership position; rather, these followers choose degrees of participation based on their roles in the affinity space. It is commonly observed that leaders share their roles and responsibility with their followers, and followers are willing to take leaders’ responsibilities. Leadership in this space is not simply authority; it is shared effort among leaders and followers. These unique characteristics of affinity spaces are created by promoting a new way of user participation. Understanding these unique interactions and environments are critical to analysis of user participation in MTS.

Due to the focus on evaluating the affinity space and the role of participants in shaping this affinity space, I came up with the questions “What are the users’ role in the MTS design process?” and “How does this site promote user participation?”

## Mode of Inquiry

### Research Context

*Mod The Sims* is the context for my research. I chose it because it focuses on a popular practice in *Sims* communities that is referred to as *modding* and has been in existence for a while. The word *modding* is commonly used in game communities and refers to modifying content or ways of playing games to perform a function not originally intended by game designers. In *The Sims* communities, *modding* means mainly creating content by using three-dimensional and photo-editing software and adding custom-content creation into *The Sims 2* or *The Sims 3*. By July 2011, MTS had more than 1,659,000 members who had written more than 2,471,000 posts on more than 216,000 threads. According to a report issued in 2011 by the site's owner, MTS added 1,080,521 new members, had 406,910 new posts, and 36,170,262 visits in 2010 alone. *Mod The Sims* defines itself as one of the largest *Sims 2* and *Sims 3* sites that provides custom content creations and premier downloads. *Mod The Sims* was founded in May, 2004, and is privately owned. The owner launched the site with the help of a small number of friends. By January, 2011, MTS grew to a staff of thirty-seven members that answer questions, dealt with rule breakers, moderated uploads, implemented new site features and systems, wrote FAQs, and updated programs and information on *modding*, and more. At the top of the staff team, there are also *site helpers* who are not staff members, but they assist in managing the site in many ways. The sheer volume of activities in MTS justifies the size and

dedication of their management team. Members create new *Sims* content and share with other *Sims* players. Some members help other members with their modding. The management team also assists in running the site. All activities in MTS, including content creations, instruction of modding skills, and management of the site are voluntary. In other words, this site is operated by users for users.

### **Data Collection**

This study is part of a larger research project to investigate learning and literacy in game-focused affinity spaces by applying ethnographic methods (Black, 2008; Hine, 2000; 2009; Jones, 1995; Markham & Baym, 2009) to understand these online communities and their implications for new educational methodology and instructional design. In this study, I have adopted the view that the Internet is “a culture in its own right” (Hine, 2000, p.14). I aimed to understand the complexity of the relationship between the technology and social interactions in real time and space (Hine, 2000). Through ethnographic inquiry, I treat “shared practices” (Hine, 2000; Jones, 1995) in MTS as “socially constructed” (Hine, 2009, p.11) and “cultural products” (Black, 2008, p.19), whose meanings we need to understand.

To facilitate my study, I have lurked in MTS since 2008 to become familiar with its interface, culture, and practices. I observed high-user involvement and participation in MTS and got familiar with the shared patterns of interaction among users. When I became interested in user participation patterns, my knowledge of this space led me to investigate one site forum in particular, *Site*

*News*, which announces all news for MTS, including details of changes and other administrative information. This forum is unique, even among many other forums in MTS, because it keeps all original posts from the date of the site's release. Many other forums do not keep the very first posts due to the space it takes to hold the information. This forum retains all posts from the very first one, which was posted on May 14, 2004 to welcome visitors to *Mod the Sims 2* when the site was opened to the public. Originally, the name of this site was *Mod The Sims 2* because when the site owner launched it, *The Sims 2* was the newest version of the game. After *The Sims 3* was released on June 2, 2009, the site owner changed the name to *Mod The Sims*. Whenever the site owner and administrative staff have issues or wish to make changes to MTS, they share them with members and guests (I will use the term users which includes members and guests). These users share their opinions and ideas about these topics with staff members.

Interested in patterns of user participation, I carefully read posts in this forum to get a sense of the interactions among users and staff members in this forum. After I browsed through the interactions, I could recognize patterns of user involvement and the various ways that staff responded. Additionally, I could see the depth and range of user involvement in the process of the site's design and staff's attitude toward users' responses. The next step in my analysis was to do a more focused study of participation patterns in a subset of the forum data.

This forum has 355 threads from May 14, 2004 to December 11, 2011. Among the 355 threads, I selected 83 threads from the first post on May 14, 2004

to the one-year-anniversary post on May 14, 2005. I applied the traditional ethnographic length of observation, which requires at least one year (Tobin, 2005) to follow changes over that time period. These 83 threads got 1,344 replies; thus combining original posts and all replies, I analyzed 1,427 posts to identify patterns of user participation in the process of the site's design.

### **Data Analysis**

Grounded in a language-focused content analysis, I investigate interactions through forum posts among users and administrative staff in an online space by looking at language structure, meaning, usage, context, and learning processes. To understand the interactions in this online space, I employed Herring's *computer-mediated discourse analysis* (CMDA) to integrate content analysis with discourse-focused methods. New media scholars have discussed the need for new analytic methods as a result of ever-changing communication technologies (Mitra & Cohen, 1999; Wakeford, 2000). Consequently, I applied web content analysis (Herring, 2010), in an effort to "cover a broad range of content [in online and virtual spaces]" (p.237) related to new media research. This approach includes nontraditional perspectives that claim connections with traditional content analysis, which is established on systematic, objective, and quantitative methods for studying communication (Krippendorff, 2004; Weare & Lin, 2000). Even though traditional content analysis applies a systematic and objective approach, scholars from various disciplines including literacy, education, and anthropology have introduced qualitative analytical methods into

content analysis (Bernard & Ryan, 1998) by adopting inductive category development and deductive category application (Mayring, 2000). According to McMillan (2000), many web content analyses have failed to apply strict content analysis guidelines due to “the dynamic nature and sheer numbers of unities of Internet analyses [that] makes random sampling infeasible” (Herring, 2010, p. 237). The nature of Internet environments requires a different approach to analyze content rather than strictly relying on random sampling. It promotes modification of sampling such as guided or framed sampling depending on research focuses.

I followed Herring’s (2004) five-step process of CMDA. I applied coding and counting method in initial analyses to come up with key concepts and then used discourse analysis to understand patterns of interactions in depth. Herring’s five steps (2010, p.237) include:

- 1) Articulate research question(s);
- 2) Select computer-mediated data sample;
- 3) Operationalize key concept(s) in terms of discourse features;
- 4) Applying method(s) of analysis to data sample; and
- 5) Interpret results.

As previously stated, my research question are “What are users’ roles in the MTS design process?” and “How does this site promote user participation?”

To answer these questions, I collected 1,427 posts from the *Site News* over a period of one year from May 14, 2004 to May 14, 2005. When I read all posts, I made notes for each about the content. After I read all of the posts, I came up

with nine key concepts for the content. Then I categorized the posts based on the nine concepts. I divided the nine concepts into two categories based on the source of posts; sources were users or administrative staff (see Table 3)

Table 3

*Nine categories of 1,427 posts from Site News*

From users	From administrative staff
Support Changes/MTS	Administrative Report
Technical Information	Recruit Ideas
General Suggestions	Respond to questions
Error Report	Take action of suggestions
Dissatisfaction	

In my analysis, I especially focused on participation patterns. I came up with additional categories that represent the patterns of user participation, responses, and announcements from administrative staff in this forum. I then used discourse analysis to generate in-depth interpretations of each category. In the following results section, I present interpretations of these categories to illustrate how this site promotes users' participation and patterns of user involvement in the design process.



## Findings

In this section, I share my findings and illustrate a new perspective on user participation in the design process. I use posts from *Site News* to examine how users and staff members negotiate and collaborate, design the site together, how users and staff interact at different levels of involvement, and their roles in MTS. Further, I illustrate my results by categorizing two different aspects of understanding the MTS design process. One is related to sharing leadership to establish a new social context in the design process. The other is considering design as a collaborative and shared effort instead of a one-dimensional process. In sharing these findings, I identify a new pattern of user participation in the design process of an affinity space.

### Sharing Culture

As previously mentioned, one of the attributes of the site is that the owner acts as resource person and promotes collaboration rather than giving orders to users (Gee, 2004). Users in this affinity space include two different types of people—guests and members—in MTS. *Mod the Sims* allows people who do not have a membership—defined as guests—to be able to browse the site with certain restrictions; however, they can leave comments on the public forums. Members have more freedom and fewer restrictions when participating in MTS. This vital openness promotes more user participation in this space not just in the design process, but in the overall activities of MTS as well. Additionally, sharing leadership is a crucial element that fosters new user participation in the design

process, which is not typically what happens during the design process in other sectors including business, marketing, manufacturing, technology, and instructional development. In this section, I elucidate how MTS staff shares leadership with users.

**Members become administrative staff.** The site owner created MTS; however, from the very beginning, he was not the only person to manage this site. He invited his friends to manage with him at an early stage. Furthermore, the administrative staff then recruited people to join and to run the site together.

MTS2 is looking for a few people to lend a hand, for more info visit:  
Thanks  
- Admins. (*MTS* post, November 6, 2004)

Even though the site owner has the absolute power to change anything and access the server, which holds all information about MTS, he shares his authority and responsibilities with administrative staff in a casual and open way as seen below.

Hi guys n' gals,  
Our forums are being put back up again as I type. You'll notice a few changes, namely that there's more sections. Hopefully this will make life easier for us all when posting.

Over the next few days, we'll be moving old posts into their new dedicated sections so be patient if a thread you're talking in moves. Please take a few moments to READ the new section descriptions to avoid posting in the wrong place. (*MTS* post, October 23, 2004)

A staff member posted this announcement that exhibits how staff shares leadership with members by using “we.” Although, I could not find the exact number of staff members, this post represents an example of how sharing leadership has been demonstrated by staff from the beginning of the site’s history.

Recently, in December 2011, the site had 24 moderators, 16 staff members—including 5 administrators—7 senior moderators, and 4 super moderators. The staff explains how to become a moderator.

There is no "application process" for becoming a mod on MTS. If we decide that we need an extra pair of hands in a certain area, then we look at the members who use that area. Any who stand out as consistently being helpful, constructive, level-headed and polite are picked out and discussed. If all staff members are happy with the prospect of that being person being a moderator, then they are made so.

If you have modly ambitions, then the best thing to do is to be a helpful member - even if you're not asked to be a mod, your help will be greatly appreciated. (*MTS* post, August 31, 2009)

According to the description, the administrative staff consists of ordinary members who get promoted. Their roles and responsibilities vary based on their positions (See Appendix E for more detailed descriptions of each role). Based on degrees of user dedication, members will be chosen for administrative staff. Even those who are chosen can decline to become administrative staff. This statement exhibits the criteria for administrative staff and reflects the culture of MTS, which values sharing and collaboration. This site, which is run by users for users, expects and encourages users' involvement in every aspect to sustain the space. The criteria of choosing administrative from among dedicated members opens the possibility that any member can become staff and run this site depending on how they choose to participate. Sharing leadership allows users to choose their roles, and forms of participation range from lurker to administrator depending on user effort and dedication. This environment and culture of sharing leadership promotes more ways and levels of participation.

**Publicizing executive decisions.** All news items for MTS including detailing changes and all other information have been shared in the *Site News* forum. The range of news is from simple announcements to serious changes and decisions. Communicating decisions does not simply share leadership with users. By sharing all executive decisions, it makes the leadership process more transparent and open, inviting users to be part of decision-making. Users in MTS always share their concerns, interests, needs, and so on. Further, when administrative staff shares their decisions, users typically provide comments that support their decisions, provide other perspectives, or point out implications. Thus, publicizing announcements is not a one-way communication from the staff to users. It is a conversation related to their decisions with a follow up discussion based on the comments posted.

Among 83 posts I examined, some examples present the openness of sharing. Posted on April 12, 2005, by a staff member other than the owner, this thread indicates their decision and reports the progress of work after they installed a new server on April 4, 2005.

We're making a major change to the organization of the downloads and betas sections of the site. Both types of items are now listed in the Downloads section. The new forums have a lot more subdivisions so that hopefully it will be easier to find what you're looking for. We do plan to add a nice front-end page that displays... well... prettier than the forums for the downloads section. That should be added soon.

The old forums have been archived, which means you can view and download from them, but you can't post to them. The entire staff is working on moving all of the old items into the new forums, but it's a time-consuming project.

The new forums are open for new posts. And... I will explain more about the rules of those forums in the forums themselves. Please do check the announcements when they are made.

UPDATE:

This is coming along very well. We're not done yet, but the moderators have been working overtime and we've moved way faster than I expected. Yes, we know that the thumbnail display in forum view isn't working right now. And we know some categories are missing or incorrect. Working on it. (*MTS* post, April 12, 2005)

This staff member reported the major changes of the download forum based on hardware updates. This staff explained the staff's vision, such as adding "more subdivisions" and a "nice front-end page." Interestingly, users suggested adding more subdivisions. For example, one member said,

I think it's time to split Genetics from Skins / Outfits and possibly public Lots from Houses?! (*MTS* post, October 17, 2004)

Another similar comment about managing the download section follows:

For the upload/downloads in the skins section...  
Have a section for 'single' items, then have a 'collections' section for the next gen mods for that skin with no further updates on that particular skin. So in other words, get them all in one zip/rar file with maybe a readme inside to let the d/l'er know which package is which in that zip/rar. (*MTS* post, October 17, 2004)

These posts suggested making subdivisions on the download section. Due to hardware capabilities, the staff took action on the suggestions a year later.

However the first post example indicated that staff incorporates users' comments into their management. It shows that they appreciate users' comments, and they listen to users' needs. This update report indicates that the staff considers users as clients who have more power than designers in the business world. For example, clients have the power to make the final decision based on their level of

satisfaction with a product before it is produced for the market. Thus, the consultant (equivalent to MTS staff) must meet their satisfaction in order to retain their business. Similarly, staff must satisfy users. If the site does not meet users' expectations, users will leave the site, and the site would close. Thus, publicizing executive decisions not only shares information, it recruits more users, a.k.a business.

To support this claim, the first example posted April 12, 2005 shown above got 77 replies including many that stated appreciation for the staff's work, more questions about changes, suggestions, and reports regarding feedback about changes to the site. Through this sharing process and participatory culture, the staff presents their decisions to inform users and recruit more user involvement, which serves to share leadership, exhibit their effort to satisfy users' concerns, and demonstrates their desire to build a better site with users for users.

**Recruitment of user participation.** Since the site went live, administrative staff has consistently recruited users' knowledge, skills, and opinions. Sharing knowledge and skills is the main activity in this space, which makes it a "knowledge space" (Levy, 1997). Based on this norm, both administrative staff and users value everybody's knowledge, skills, and opinions (Jenkins et al, 2006; Gee, 2004). The MTS staff not only value users' knowledge, they also recruit their participation in many aspects of site management. From a design perspective, this post from the site owner represents inviting users' input.

Hi All,

We've added an About page, a FAQ page (for those of you with

burning questions about how to install custom content), and are in the process of re-doing the wiki too. If you want to contribute a question to the FAQ, have a look here

[http://www.modthesims2.com/forum\\_viewtopic.php?3.962](http://www.modthesims2.com/forum_viewtopic.php?3.962)

...

We're glad to say the site has taken off in a big way and don't hesitate to mention if you'd like to see any new features.

Regards,

MTS2 Admin Staff (*MTS* post, September 27, 2004)

This staff publicly invited questions at the FAQ section and fostered ideas for new features in the site that could lead to design changes and also recruited content for the FAQ and design features from users. This publicized recruitment facilitated more users' input along with other activities in MTS. For example, MTS had some problems with direct linking from other sites in November, 2004. After exchanging many posts, the site owner posted this comment to recruit users' input.

Okay for those of you who had problems, I need your help.

Please see [http://www.modthesims2.com/forum\\_viewtopic.php?.....](http://www.modthesims2.com/forum_viewtopic.php?.....)

Thanks (*MTS* post, November 20, 2004)

I could not access this link to show the actual content because it was an old link which is not activated anymore. However, even guests can post their opinions for design changes and executive decisions in Site News after administrative staff have made their announcements. This openness of participation is not observed in any domains of current design process that I reviewed in the preceding overview of design perspectives such as in user participation in products, technology, and instructional design. Participation in design processes that I investigated is highly selective, restricted, and controlled

by a design team. Participants are expected to have adequate knowledge of design activities in certain products to have an influence in the design process. Their concerns or needs are not publicized to other users or future users. Their input is only for design teams. However, everyone who uses MTS is invited to partake in the design process. The practice of inviting input and in MTS creates a wider range of user participation in the design process.

**Handling user dissatisfaction.** Based on the posts I examined, most users support administrative decisions. However, some users do express opposing viewpoints with the site's administration. When users share their disappointment and regrets with others, the staff respond by clarifying the reasons for their actions. Here is an example that shows user dissatisfaction.

I don't like this new concept of an all in one Forum. No Avatar, No Download Statistic, No Votes. In the past it was only the betamod section like this, and i found it very unusefull, now it is the whole site.

If I come to the Site in the morning and look what's new, there come "hundreds" of new Threads and for me it's very difficult to know what's interesting and what not. (*MTS* post, December 5, 2004)

This post demonstrated that not all users provide positive support. The author presented perspectives on better design features that show download statistics. The staff responded by providing information on how the statistics information worked during that period. Currently on the download forum, each content creator shows his or her own statistics including numbers of replies and views. These statistics help users to navigate the site. Here is another example of dissatisfaction after the staff redesigned the front page. This user did not like the missing “preview” function.



I like the new look!!! It is so clean...and yeah, it was a bit of a surprise, but a good one. My only thing is that when I scrolled over the topics, it used to show the first entry of a thread. (MTS post, March 8, 2005)

Another user complained about the missing preview function too.

Oh dear now I have to wait for a window to open before I know what the thread is about! Usually the threads aren't too informative, they're like the first few words of a sentence that could go either way...(MTS post, March 8, 2005)

After their regrets, the site owner responded,

On the advice of a couple of the mods, I've re-enabled the preview on the latest forum posts. 😊 (MTS post, March 8, 2005)

Their dissatisfaction was not ignored. The concern was seriously considered and the administrator even changed the design of the feature. Openness to considering every comment creates a more sharing and participatory culture.

The strong, inclusive social ethic of the site allows leaders to share their role as decision makers and encourages users to help run the site by becoming administrative staff. This sharing of responsibilities and work fosters a higher level and new pattern of user participation; the staff and users work together in the design process. Additionally, all opinions, knowledge, and skills are valued. In addition to such a high value placed on user input, any users can be part of the design process and take on the designer's role to some degree.

### **Design is Collaborative and Shared Effort**

Design practices in MTS are highly collaborative, and they rely on the process of sharing effort among the owner, administrative staff, and users. In this section, I elucidate comments from users that effected changes to site features.

The range of comments varies from highly technical to general. Users participate as technical supporters, idea bankers, testers of change, and/or motivational supports based on their skills, knowledge, and interests. The design process in MTS involves these various roles of users and voluntary administrative staff that define the design as collaborative and shared effort.

**Technical supporters.** Some users in this space provide technical knowledge to assist in the design of the site, such as how to program the server, how the staff needs to change when it faces difficulties or when users propose better solutions. This person suggested an idea that the staff had not even solicited.

To Admin.

It seems that this BB software has option to display time in local (user-specified) time zone.

User setting page has such field that sets local user timezone.

This forum is global world-wide community forum.

Please turn on global option to display time in localized time zone.

Or is there any reason or policy to stick to GMT?

Thanks (*MTS* post, October 19, 2004)

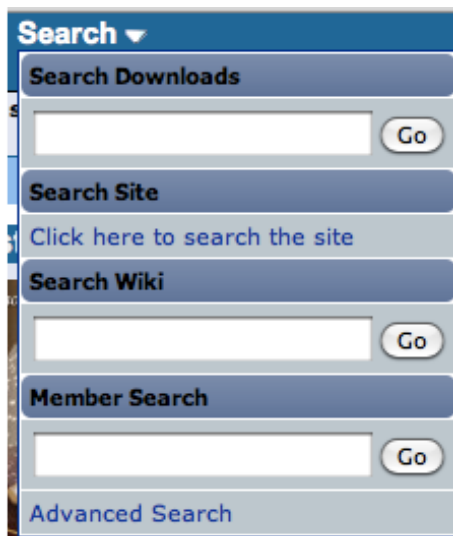
This user addressed users from all around the world and the importance of considering a detail to satisfy users. Additionally, this user knew the server that MTS uses—BB (Bulletin Board System)—and provided directions for how the staff could turn on the time function. Currently, users can set their time zone, and even daylight-savings time, depending on their location in the world. Although this suggestion did not change an easily noticeable design feature, it did cause the staff to even pay attention to small design features.

Another suggestion displayed how users' input could improve design and usage of the site.

Also you should change the javascript on the search page to open a new window, or change it to something else so you have the option. (*MTS* post, October 17, 2004)

Based on this comment, I assume that the search function was not linked to a new window, which would have been very convenient.

Currently, the search function in MTS is on the main bar on the front page in addition to several other choices (see Figure 8).



*Figure 8.* Screenshot of drop-down of the search function.

When users choose “click here to search the site,” a whole new window pops up that has detailed search options that users can set. In 2004, users might not have expected these advanced search functions. However, one member’s suggestion triggered the staff to pay more attention to the search function and consequently they rewrote the Java Script.

Users, who act as technical supporters help the staff to change design features with more technical comments and applicable suggestions. I only present two examples here; however, many users provide these kinds of input and share their knowledge to improve the site.

**Idea bankers.** While some users provide high technical knowledge, some users who may have better design tastes in general suggest better functions and design features for MTS. The number of these supporters is bigger than technical supporters, because this support does not require technological knowledge. The range of suggestions is from adding movies or changing color themes of the site to adding preview options or sorting threads. Anyone is able to share their concerns and suggestions with the staff and users. However, not all suggestions are accepted and applied in the site's features. Sometimes the technology does not support the function, or the staff does not know how to fulfill the needs. Among the general suggestions, I introduce two examples that changed the site's features. One member supported two other members' suggestion about the sorting of new threads.

I do agree ...that having the 'new items' sorted by categories made it much easier to keep track of the various threads. There have been many occasions where I only had time to read a few posts. In those situations, it was nice to just skip past the chatbox section, the chit-chat, introduction, etc forums, and go straight to the 2 or 3 forums that I was most interested in. (*MTS* post, December 5, 2004)

Based on these members' suggestions, the staff responded.

Yeah I just tried it myself and it definitely needs tweaking  
I could probably get it sorted by forum id instead of datestamp which would help a lot. (*MTS* post, December 5, 2004)

Currently, the site shows new threads on the top of each sub-forum. The site now has more sub-forums than it had in 2004. Consequently, new threads no longer show on the front page. Each sub-forum shows the newest threads on the top of the forum. These users emphasized the importance of showing and organizing new threads so that they could navigate this site more conveniently. Another suggestion that had influence follows.

The only thing I don't like as much is the download section, because it seems to be sorted by the last comment rather than the date of the file, which would be closer to the date of the initial post. That will make it \*much\* harder to be sure you've reviewed all the files in a specific category. (*MTS* post, December 5, 2004)

This user suggested another sorting option in the download section, and the staff accepted his comment.

Yeah I do need to look at the downloads and get them sorted by thread date. I'm not sure exactly how much work would be involved. (*MTS* post, December 5, 2004)

Currently, threads in the download section are sorted from oldest to newest, rather than by the newest first. The suggestion from this member in 2004 changed the sorting system, which MTS still maintains. The next two examples present users' involvement in the design of the site in which they not only make the site look good, but they also improve the design so that it is more user friendly. As Urban and van Hippel (1988) stressed, conceiving users as market researchers who can provide real world needs or solutions, users in MTS have a better understanding of site features and how to make it more accessible.

Two examples below are directly related to embellishment and personalization of the site.

I know this might be a complicated option but maybe you could add color themes to the site. I know a site that has this. Maybe you can see their source if you think about it using this. (MTS post, October 2004 17, 2004)

Due to technical limitations, the staff could only add the single option of choosing between blue and grey.

Hi All,

Following feedback from large numbers of members who didn't like the previous grey colour scheme on MTS2, I've implemented a new default blue style for the site. (Of course, I thought the old colour scheme was blue anyway!)

Thanks to ... for the colours, and ... and ... for the tweaks. We've kept the old colour scheme still, so if you don't like the new one here is how to change:

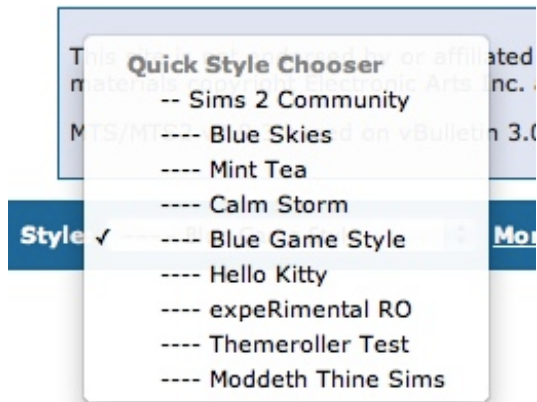
Quick Links -> Edit Options -> Scroll down until you get to "Miscellaneous Options", then change Forum Skin to "MTS2 Grey".

Alternatively, on most pages you will see a drop down box right at the bottom with the styles in it, and you can change it there.

I've also changed the way the HTML is outputted for threads, so that very long threads get rendered by the browser a lot quicker. This should improve member usability.

Feel free to let us know what you think. (MTS post, April 27, 2005)

Now six years later, the site provides various options for individualized color themes of the site. Even the process of changing the theme is easier than the description above.



*Figure 9.* Screenshot of choices of themes

This function is at the bottom on the front page and is titled “style” with drop-down options. Whenever users choose themes, the site changes the color. This option enhances users’ experience and makes the site feel very personalized. This suggestion came from users’ perspectives. These kinds of suggestions help simplify the site’s features and design, allowing staff to easily meet the needs of users.

**Testers.** Some users who do not have advanced technical knowledge or an interest in design still find ways to participate in the design process of the site. These users act like testers in the design processes. Testers in MTS primarily report errors or malfunctions after changes have been made. Although all users face the same problems, these users took the on the responsibility of reporting malfunctions as testers do in the manufacturing process. Based on their reports, the staff is quickly able to hear about errors.

For example, in 2004, the site owner explained how to link directly to another site. After the link function added, many users faced a similar problem

that the site reloaded the homepage, whenever they tried to download, The first user reported this error at 9:36 AM, which was less than two hours after the announcement. Within the next 20 hours, seven reports were posted. One member provided technical information that indicated the possible cause for the problem as well as a solution. The site's owner addressed his comments and fixed the problem. These kinds of error reports and responses are commonly observed in MTS.

Another error report demonstrates the important role of reports from users. The users provided information regarding serious content problems on the download section, but these were hard to find except during actual downloads. Since MTS is highly focused on custom content creations and share them, the download section is an important forum.

Some entries in download section has download problem.  
(especially dated old download items)  
When I click on download button, it seems to work.  
But No data is transmitted, in fact.  
Check non-working download file and remove it from the list. (*MTS* post, October, 2004)

Based on his report, some content in the download section did not work properly. This error cannot easily be caught by the staff, because they focus more on managing the whole site rather than on checking detailed elements. This report directed the staff to check the content and files in the download section and fix the problem. Without this user's input, the quality of the download section may not have been able to meet users' expectations. Thus, users acting as testers have dedicated roles in the design process and any users can take part in this tester role.



Due to quick responses from these voluntary testers, the staff could find errors quickly and fix them in order to run the site smoothly.

**Motivational supporter.** While some users dedicate their abilities to the actual design process in particular ways, many users participate in the design process as motivational supporters. They cheer up the staff, and provide accolades for the staff's work and effort. This participation in the design process can be considered trivial; however, it is an important element that allows the staff to determine user satisfaction. The staff team usually responds to users immediately, which in turn allows users to give immediate feedback regarding the changes and their appreciation for such quick action. Here is one example.

Congrats ..., You see that's My First post on your Site, But I'm a longTimer, Not a Newbie 😊 ... I had really like old layout, The downloads section was almost great, since you've jump to vb, the Downloads was screwed up and unusable for me because you can't select the new dls easier than old layout, But Now, Thats avoided, I have to say thank you For that 😊 ... Now I like there more 😊 (Look that killer smilies he he) 🙏... (MTS post, December 7, 2004)

This comment illustrated how much this person uses and knows about MTS. He shows his recognition of staff works in MTS and how much he likes this change by using emoticons. After his post, the owner of the site responded, “hehe thanks ... I'm going to add more smilies at some point (MTS post, December 8, 2004).” His support made the owner happy and rewarded him for all his voluntary work. Here is another example; but it is a little different.

I love it! It's SO much easier to find things now! 🙌 This is such an improvement! Thanks for all the hard work! :clap: 🍻🍻🍻 (MTS post, April 13, 2005)

This person also supports and appreciates the change to the download section that made it easier to navigate. This kind of support and positive feedback promotes an environment that users value and staff appreciates. It also motivates staff and other users to share their feelings, concerns, and needs in the design process.

In summary, all of the above forms of voluntary user participation constitute different roles that promote a new participation pattern in the design process of MTS. By looking at interactions among the staff and users in MTS, it is possible to see that the design process of this site is a multidimensional process rather than a monolithic system that flows from the designer to the users. Users can become administrators and take on roles as a technical supporter, an idea banker, as testers, and as motivational supporter depending on their skills, abilities, and knowledge. In addition, these roles are not mutually exclusive. They overlap. All these people interact together to design the site together and to make it a better place for them. Thus, the design process in MTS is a collaborative work and a shared effort. To understand the design process in MTS, I have argued that we must view design as a collaborative process with shared leadership and efforts.

## Discussion

Researchers in PD are looking for useful distinctions between methods, tools, and techniques for successful PD; however, I propose that it is time to rethink a more fundamental understanding of participation instead of simply emphasizing how to do PD better as it has previously existed. To support my suggestion, I explored the patterns of user participation in MTS as a way to increase understanding of how this site was created and sustained and how this can apply to education and learning. To present the patterns of user participation in the MTS design process, I analyzed posts in the *Site News* forum. I particularly paid attention to leadership sharing and collaborative practices in the site-design process. I examined interactions among the staff as the design team and users based on affinity space theory. My analysis revealed a different pattern of sharing leadership and responsibilities. It also highlighted the importance of user participation in the collaborative design process of an informal learning space such as MTS. My findings accentuated how the administrative staff shares their power, leadership, responsibilities, and roles with users, which users voluntarily choose depending on their ability and dedication to the design process.

Many different sectors in the design process try to promote more user participation. As Kensing and Blomberg (1998) emphasize, “PD is ...an effort to rebalance the power relations between users and technical experts and between workers and managers” (p.181). The broad range of PD still faces challenges pertaining to “the rebalance of the power relations.” This is especially the case in our current educational system, which often treats learners as consumers,

fostering a mindset in students of “consumerism” (Illich, 1971) rather than one of “ownership of problems” (Bruner, 1996). As a result of this learning culture and its influences, learners—workers—often feel left out of decisions by managers—and teachers— denying them opportunities to take more active roles the design/learning process.

My analysis presented how the administrative staff at MTS shares its leadership with users in a way that allows users to become administrative staff, to publicize executive decisions, to recruit new users’ input, and to show appreciation for criticism. Within this inclusive design culture, users can choose their roles in the design process as technical supporter, idea banker, testers, and social facilitators. *Mod The Sims* presents a new way of dealing with authority by sharing leadership and responsibilities between users and technical experts, workers and managers, and users and the administrative staff. Through sharing leadership and responsibilities, users voluntarily take different roles in the design process, and the staff encourages them to promote the recruitment of better knowledge, skills, and ideas from users.

By rethinking design as collaborative and shared effort between the designer team and users, MTS broadens the roles of users in the design process and rebalances the power. By demonstrating how the staff share their leadership and promote more user participation along with sharing responsibilities, this finding can inform design practices in instructional design, not only at the macro level such as in school curriculum but also at the micro level in each classroom. We need more studies about these grass-root design practices in online affinity

spaces to understand how other affinity spaces share their leadership and design processes. Further, this research might reveal other patterns of sharing power in the design process. We also need empirical studies that apply these findings from the MTS affinity space to other design processes, especially instructional design in school settings.

Finally, my analysis displays how Gee's affinity space theory (2004) is a useful framework to understand the design process in MTS. I show how features of affinity spaces promote a new, integrated design space that mirror what Fischer and Giaccardi (2006) emphasized as the need for new design spaces that can bring together both technical and social conditions for participation. This online affinity space already fosters technical and social conditions to promote high PD. Online communities and their environments have unique cultures and interactions. These spaces quickly adopt environmental and technical changes and elaborate usage of these changes effectively. We as researchers ought to realize and acknowledge the power of these unique spaces and to understand activities in these spaces in order to expand these effective activities to real life educational settings.

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## CHAPTER 4

### WHAT USER-GENERATED TUTORIALS TEACH US ABOUT TEACHING IN AN ONLINE GAMING COMMUNITY: UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE PRACTICES THROUGH SYSTEMATIC FUNCTIONAL GRAMMAR

#### **Introduction**

According to a 2003 report from the Institute of Education Sciences, the use of computer and Internet resources have become an indicator of living standards in the United States. This flourishing of Internet use invites a diversity of information technology (IT) into our lives. People communicate and connect with each other through email, chatting, text messages, Twitter, and Facebook to find information any time of day or night. The pervasiveness of IT in our lives strongly influences our decisions in educational practices, opening up a new era of opportunity, collaboration, and resources. The development of IT provides access to educational resources that were not available in the past (National Academy of Science, 1999). Additionally, the Sloan Consortium (2009) reports that online learning provides an advantage and helps meet students' specific needs. Many scholars in digital media and gaming studies have written extensively about online communities and spaces, which Gee (2004) refers to as *affinity spaces*. According to scholars, affinity spaces can be important places for learning (Gee, 2004; Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robinson, 2006). Many studies have presented the potential for learning outcomes from their studies of online

affinity spaces that cover topics in literacy development (Gee, 2003; 2004; 2010a; 2010b; Lammers, 2011), scientific reasoning (Steinkuehler, 2007; Steinkuehler & Duncan, 2008), historical understanding (Squire, 2004), technology learning (Hayes & King, 2009), information literacy (Martine & Steinkuehler, 2010), language learning (Black, 2008, 2009; Lam, 2004; Hayes & Lee, 2012), and economics (Castronova, 2002). At the same time, a growing volume of research focused on teenagers has developed that examines the relationship of learning and digital media in general (Ito, 2010; Ito et al, 2010).

Building on the previous studies discussed above, this study sheds further light on IT learning in affinity spaces, through an analysis of language practices associated with tutorials. In this paper, I examine the nature of user-generated tutorials for the development of 3D modding skills in *Mod The Sims* (MTS), an online gaming community that is devoted to 3D game modification. The tutorials examined in this study were created by digital media users who were not professionally educated as technical writers. According to the Pew Internet Project report (2007), 64% of online teens have created content on the Internet. Writing tutorials is one of content-creation activities that users commonly engage in, and it is easily observed in gaming communities and other affinity spaces. Typically, tutorials follow a template; however, in this online world, there are various formats. These include a written format, a video format, an audio format, and a hybrid format. We can even find written or video tutorials about changing the aspects of Youtube and other websites. The range of skills and knowledge that user-generated online tutorials cover is vast. However, little study has been

done on the nature of user-generated tutorials and learning, especially research with an emphasis on linguistic elements and social practices.

This research is part of a larger ethnographic study that investigates learning through new digital media. It is informed by theories of situated learning and language acquisition (Gee, 2004). To illustrate the nature of user-generated tutorials in learning content and language practices in MTS, I closely examined the tutorial forums and six tutorials deemed popular based on users' evaluation. I applied Halliday's (1989) Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) to understand the particular language forms and practices in these user-generated tutorials and the associated discussions. Overall, this study is devoted to better understanding of instructional texts created by users in this online affinity space and how the whole community collaboratively develops texts in grassroots online learning environments.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

This study is influenced by the work of Vygotsky (1978) as well as other sociocultural perspectives on learning and literacy (Cazden, 1988; Gee, 2004; Heath, 1983; Ochs & Shieffelin, 1984; Scollon & Scollon, 1981). Sociocultural theory stresses that learning and knowledge are processes that occur as the result of participation in socially and culturally constructed, situated contexts. In sociocultural theory, learning is viewed as the process in which members become able to participate in a community and show their understanding through talk, text, experiences, affiliation, and use of resources. Scholars also believe that

language is considered a reflection of the context (Christie & Martin, 2007; Gee, 2011; Gibbons, 2006; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Halliday & Mattiessen, 2004; Martin, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004; 2012). In other words, people use language to fit into a particular context, which then further helps them to produce and reproduce in that context (Gee, 2011; Pennycook, 2010). Influenced by sociocultural theory, in general, and based on the perspective that language is a reflection of context, this study specifically applies Halliday's SFG approach as a theoretical framework. This approach treats language as a functional tool that "serves basic human functions to represent experiences and knowledge, to construct relationships, and to create meaningful messages" (Christie, 2007, p.5). In this study, I examine the linguistic choices that promote learning and create a collaborative learning environment through user-generated tutorials, which are instructional texts.

### **Systemic Functional Grammar**

This study applies Halliday's (1996) theoretical framework of SFG. Halliday and other systemic functional linguists have the perspective that language is a social semiotic system (Christie & Martin, 2007; Gibbons, 2006; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Halliday & Mattiessen, 2004; Martin, 2009; Schleppegrell, 2004; 2012). This perspective focuses attention on the linguistic choices that speakers and writers make from a range of choices within a linguistic system. This perspective emphasizes that the function of these choices is to contribute to meaning-making in any given context (Christie & Martin, 2007;

Gibbons, 2006; Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Halliday & Mattiessen, 2004; Martin, 2005; Schleppegrell, 2004; 2012). According to Halliday (1991), SFG is not only about how people use language; it is about the nature of language and “why the system works the way it does” (p.6). From this angle, language is considered as a dynamic system in which speakers, writers, listeners, and readers constantly make choices. Through these choices, the language system is maintained and modified over time (Hayes & Lee, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2012). For example, students learn how to make appropriate linguistic choices that fit in the school context (Schleppegrell, 2004).

A key concept in SFG is the *register*. The register is a constellation of lexical and grammatical elements (Halliday & Hasan, 1989) that highlight the kinds of language used in particular social settings or activities (Lemke, 2012; Gibbons, 2006). Various linguistic choices, or registers, are represented by three categories depending on the relationship between language and the context. In SFG, this relationship is expressed as *field*, *tenor*, and *mode*:

- Field is related to “what the language is about” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p.51). In other words, field involves “the topics and actions which language is used to express, or what the participants are engaged in” (Hayes & Lee, 2012).
- Tenor refers to “language users, their relationships to each other and their purposes” (Hayes & Lee, 2012). Tenor is affected by



status, which is how individuals position themselves in a relationship (Gibbons, 2006).

- Mode is the channel of communication, including the linguistic choices that are made to organize texts. These linguistic choices are influenced by social contexts as well as allow individuals to meet external expectations (Hayes & Lee, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004).

Systematic functional linguists argue that language users have choices in a semiotic system. People make choices from linguistic resources—field, tenor, and mode—to fulfill their goals and purpose according to the particular context they are in. These three aspects of semiotic properties guide users to make different choices that create linguistic consequences. For example, tutorial writers in MTS use certain forms of language that are expected in this community in order to establish their identity as a knowledgeable member. They also do this to share their knowledge and skills using expected semiotic forms such as pictures and screenshots. The language choices in MTS are not the same as those found in professionally written manuals, because writers work in different contexts with expectations for users to choose a different tenor and mode even though the field is similar. Additionally, MTS (as a social context) has its own expectations of tutorial writers. The MTS staff expect tutorial writers to adopt certain ways of communicating (tenor and mode) with other users in MTS. As will be discussed further in the results section, Halliday's three semiotic categories provide a solid

framework for analyzing user-generated tutorials in MTS to explain why these tutorials have certain features and why they function the way they do.

### **Online Space and Secondary Orality**

Language and context are reciprocal. Language is shaped by context, which is also influenced by language. Because technology creates a different context in an online space, language use in an online space—so-called computer-mediated/ Internet-mediated discourse—brings unique elements to the discourse. Ong (2002) defined this as “secondary orality” (p.3). Grounded in highly interactive communicational technology, language usage in online spaces revitalizes elements of primary orality that occur in oral culture. According to Gee and Hayes (2011), primary orality in oral culture enhances immediate, interactive, and more personal connections that are mainly observed in face-to-face interactions between the speaker and the audience. Written language creates more of a disconnect between authors and readers because there is frequently an extended lag time between when something is written and when it is read. According to Ong (2002), being literate is narrowly defined as the ability to read and write. Additionally, the lag time creates a less contextualized literacy activity because readers are separated from the author. Hirsch (as cited in Ong, 2002, p.77) claimed that writing enacts “context-free” language in which readers and writers cannot negotiate meaning based on context and interpretation because they are not physically in the same place at the same time.

In oral language, speakers and listeners develop a closer relationship that relies on a physical co-presence. Generating content in the same place and at the same time establishes some relationship and allows speakers and listeners to feel more connected with each other. This physically close context establishes immediate responses and negotiable interpretations in more situated contexts. However, oral language is hard to sustain and more difficult to preserve stories and knowledge because it must be passed from person to person.

Digital media allows the adoption of elements of oral language into online human interactions. In online spaces, people can communicate as if in a face-to-face context through video chat such as Skype and be less influenced by physical distance. These computational tools revitalize the elements of primary orality, such as immediate, interactive, and personal connections (Gee & Hayes, 2011; Hayes & Lee, 2012), which Ong defined as secondary orality. Furthermore, even descriptive written text in online spaces adopts oral modes of communication and maintains the benefits of written text, which can be preserved and stored as well as easily transferred across space and time. For example, tutorial writers in MTS commonly use the first-person pronoun “*we*” to put themselves in the conversation without separating themselves from readers. They use “*I*” to show how they did certain tasks instead of saying “you do this and that.” Using *we* in the text indicates writers invite readers into the conversation to send the message *I*, the writer am not above the reader. Readers, *you*, and the writer, *I*, work together and accomplish the task together.

The concept of secondary orality suggests how digital media restore interpersonal interactions that are less influenced by physical and time differences. Employing the concept of secondary orality makes sense for the study of online discourse and language usage. It has the ability to add to our understanding of tutorial discourse and its unique communication patterns that are influenced by this online context.

### **Technical Writing**

To distinguish the nature of tutorials in MTS, it is essential to understand the expectations and elements of technical writing. According Blake and Bly (1993), technical writers have traditionally been tied to engineering industries, such as aerospace, chemistry, and electronics. Influenced by the increasing usage of computers in these high-technology disciplines, technical writing has expanded to include software documents and users' manuals. The notion of technical writing, however, is not only limited to engineering and IT, it also includes any domain that deals with specialized areas (Blake & Bly, 1993). Types of technical writing now also include proposals, technical articles, papers, abstracts, reports, letters, and memos.

The focal point of technical writing is to describe the technical aspects of an object, process, or system. Because the main goal of technical writing is to transfer information, the language stresses accuracy rather than writing style. As a result of the content and main goal of technical writing, technical writers commonly sacrifice their styles of writing in order to write documents as

technically accurate, contently objective, and informatively concise as possible. To meet this goal, technical writers are expected to use coherent and precise styles of writing. Blake and Bly (1993) suggest many principles of technical writing to emphasize accuracy rather than authors' writing styles. They recommend "using the active voice," "use plain language," "write highly concise," "use specific and concrete terms," and "avoid using personal pronouns."

I specifically explored the literature on manual writing because it is similar to tutorials in MTS. The main goal of tutorials and manuals is to accomplish a specific task and to provide accurate instructions. According to Casady (1992), well written manuals help people do their work correctly and efficiently. Effective manuals are well-written, attractively designed, formatted to make it easy for users to follow instructions, and appropriately illustrated (Casady, 1992). Blake and Bly (1993) also propose guidelines for manual writing. First, they emphasize that manual writing is instructional writing. The main goal of manual writing is that readers complete a certain task while following the presented instructions in the manual, such as a recipe in a cookbook. People typically do not like reading manuals, so Blake and Bly (1993) suggest that easier is better. People do not tend to complain about manuals that are too easy to follow. Thus, Blake and Bly (1993) also suggest writing clearly and directly.

To make directions clear and concise, Blake and Bly (1993) suggest writers use the imperative voice to give simple and explicit direction. As mentioned above, Blake and Bly also recommend using the active voice as one of the key principles in technical writing. It is common to find imperative sentences

in user's manuals. Another suggestion for manual writers is "presenting instructions as a series of numbered steps" (Blake & Bly, 1992, p.154). A series of numbered steps is commonly observed in instructional manuals such as technical and software program user guides, cook books, craft books, drawing books, and even lesson plans. Various aspects of a discipline create circumstances unique to writing expectations and characters in manual writing. User-generated tutorials in MTS offer new perspectives on instructional texts and writing adapted to the online context.

### **Mode of Inquiry**

This study examines user-generated tutorials from the perspective of making comparisons to common assumptions and guidelines for creating other kinds of instructional texts. I investigated language practices in tutorials to understand the reason people use language in particular ways because of this online social context. In this affinity space and this particular context, there are certain sets of demands and expectations that contribute to how people use language. I want to look at how people learn to use language in particular ways in this site as indicating something about the context as much as about tutorials. Through this study, I illustrate the nature of these tutorials in this particular online context as well as the kinds of social interactions that take place around these tutorials. Ultimately, the "instructional texts" for participants in the site include these online discussions as well as the tutorials themselves.

## Research Context

My research interests in learning and literacy through digital media and working on the TechSavvy research team led me to play *The Sims* and to explore various online fan communities related to *The Sims*. Observing several of *The Sims* online communities, I found the most active modding *Sims* community, *Mod The Sims*. The self-definition of the site also sparked my interest:

*Mod The Sims* is one of the largest Sims 2 & Sims 3 sites, and provides premier downloads, custom content creation tutorials, general game help and social discussions on many aspects of the games. We have a friendly atmosphere and pride ourselves on the quality of creations, while being entirely free to use ([www.modthesims.info](http://www.modthesims.info)).”

Due to the popularity of customized content among MTS users, the download section is the most active forum of the five forums in *The Sims*, which include Welcome to MTS, Social, Help and Support, Modding and Creation. The second most popular forum is modding and creation, which provides “everything related to creating custom content and *mods* for the Sims game” (<http://www.modthesims.info/sitemap.php>). Emphasis is on the quality of creations.

Based on my interest in learning through digital media, I am further interested in how MTS users learn to create custom content. Through participation in MTS, I found tutorials that users write for other users as the main teaching tool. Thus, I wanted to understand the nature of tutorials and how these tutorials contribute to collaborative learning among authors, readers, and other users.

## Research Method

This study is part of a larger research project to investigate new practices in learning and literacy by applying ethnographic methods (Black, 2008; Hine, 2000; 2009; Jones, 1995; Markham & Baym, 2009) in an online community. I adopt the view that the Internet is “a culture in its own right” (Hine, 2000, p.14). I aim to understand the complexity of the relationship between technology and social interactions in real time and space (Hine, 2000). Through ethnographic inquiry, I try to understand “cultural products” (Black, 2008, p.19)—user-generated tutorials in MTS—and how users in MTS create their own semiotic system to promote learning and social interactions.

To facilitate this study, I lurked in MTS beginning in 2008 so that I could become familiar with its interface, culture, and practices. Over four years, I have observed many learning activities and practices, such as user-generated tutorials, in MTS that are promoted by users for users as well. I have also become very familiar with the shared patterns of interaction among MTS users. When I became interested in the unique learning methods in MTS, my familiarity with this space led me to inquire about tutorials. To understand language practices associated with these user-generated tutorials, I analyzed discourse patterns of tutorials through SFG. Also, I identified elements of secondary orality that might promote affiliation between writers and readers.

**Tutorials in MTS.** The self-definition of MTS boasts that it provides “custom content creation tutorials.” Users write tutorials and share them on MTS and the MTS Wiki. The *Sims 2* tutorials section generated 326 tutorials between



May 2004 and February 2012. These tutorials are organized into five different skill levels: newbie, beginners, intermediate, advanced, and numenorean. The tutorial forum has nine categories: build mode, walls and floors, body shop, object recoloring, careers, *Sims*, object creation, body shop *meshing*, hacks, and game mods. *Mod The Sims* launched on May 14, 2004, and *The Sims 2* was released on September 14, 2004. In eight years, users in MTS contributed 326 tutorials, which have covered simple recoloring to a “Programmers Guide to BHAVs (<http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=67365>).” The sheer volume of tutorials in MTS demonstrates the important role they play in this site.

Since *The Sims 3* was released on June 2, 2009, I focused on tutorials for *The Sims 3*. The screen of the first page of *The Sims 3* tutorial on the MTS Wiki shows how the site organizes tutorials so users can easily access and navigate the myriad of tutorials on the site (see Figure 10).

**Tutorials by Category**  
[CAS](#) | [Patterns](#) | [Meshing](#) | [Building](#) | [Modding](#) | [Advanced Coding](#) | [Other](#) | [Installation](#)










**Welcome**

This page is designed to help you learn any new techniques and gain a better understanding of The Sims 3, its utilities, and tools. Please feel free to browse around all of the sections to find the information that you need. Below are the main sections, start there!

**Don't Panic!**

Is this your first visit to the tutorials section of the wiki? Well, do not fear! We will have you modding in no time. Each tutorial is given a ratings and information page of its own that will help you gain an overall understanding of what each tutorial will teach.

**Tutorial Sections:**

<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>CAS Tutorials</h3> <p>Things you can stick on your sims - skintones, clothing, and more.</p> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Pattern Tutorials</h3> <p>Create a Style patterns for use on all manner of items in-game.</p> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Object Creation Tutorials</h3> <p>New objects that can be placed in game as furniture or build mode objects.</p> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Building Tutorials</h3> <p>Instructions and help on building the perfect lot in Sims 3.</p> </div> <div style="padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Create a World Tutorials</h3> <p>Sculpt and paint your very own world for your game.</p> </div>	<div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>General Modding Tutorials</h3> <p>Creating gameplay modifications and the like.</p> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Advanced Coding Tutorials</h3> <p>If you are interested in all the file formats that go to make up the game.</p> </div> <div style="border-bottom: 1px solid black; padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Other Tutorials</h3> <p>Anything else you can think of!</p> </div> <div style="padding-bottom: 5px;">  <h3>Installation Tutorials</h3> <p>To help you get custom content working in-game, and other related utilities.</p> </div>
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*Figure 10.* The first page of The Sims 3 tutorials on MTS Wiki site. It has welcoming comments and some general guidance.

It shows each division and provides a description of each category. This visual representation helps beginning users to navigate the forums and easily find the content that they want to learn. Furthermore, at the upper right corner, the announcement “don’t panic!” gets its own attention.

**Don't Panic!**

Is this your first visit to the tutorials section of the wiki? Well, do not fear! We will have you modding in no time. Each tutorial is given a ratings and information page of its own that will help you gain an overall understanding of what each tutorial will teach.

This description guides the newbie to check the rating of each tutorial to find if it is the right level for them depending on their modding ability. The description also tells users to check the information page and better understand the tutorial content. Even this short comment helps beginners who might easily be overwhelmed by the amount of information and the number of tutorials. While the Wiki site is well-organized with visual representations, the MTS site itself has sub-tutorial forums under *The Sims 3* Creation forum of the “Modding and Creation” forum. The forum looks like a general discussion forum in any online community (See Figure 11).

## Tutorials

Tutorials for creating content for the Sims 3 should be posted here. No discussion threads, only tutorials!

New thread Page 1 of 5 1 2 3 4 Next > Last » Jump ▾

Threads in Forum: Tutorials Forum Tools Search this Forum ▾

Category / Thread / Thread Starter	Rating	Last Post	Replies	Views
Category: <a href="#">Patterns</a> <a href="#">CAS Parts</a> <a href="#">Meshing - General</a> <a href="#">Object Creation</a> <a href="#">Modding - General</a> <a href="#">Create A World</a>				
<a href="#">Modding - General</a> Tutorial: Creating S3 Custom Poses with Milkshake or Blender ( 1 2 3 ... Last Page ) by <a href="#">orangemittens</a> 3rd Apr 2011 ★★★★★		Yesterday 08:22 PM by <a href="#">goth ME</a>	977	85,310

Figure 11. The screen shot of the Tutorial forum from MTS.

This tutorial forum is organized into fewer categories than the Wiki site, but it shows all of the tutorials and their titles, the original creation date, and the date of last post. Additionally, it provides the rate of tutorials from users. The tutorial on the screen shot got five stars, reflecting the rating system from users. The rating system has five different levels: spectacular, very good, good, nice effort, needs

work. Usually it is hard to find a tutorial with less than three stars. Users give stars when the tutorials are clear and helpful.

This *Sims 3* tutorial forum has 107 threads that were created between June 6, 2009, and April 3, 2011. Table 4 shows the general statistical information about this forum.

Table 4

*The Sims 3 tutorial forum*

---

Category	Number of tutorials
Patterns	12
Create A Sims Parts	36
Meshing-General	4
Object Creation	17
Modding-General	19
Create A World	19

---

*Note.* As of Feb 1, 2012.

Among the six categories I investigated, I focused on Create A Sims Parts because it has the most number of tutorials. The content covers topics for beginners, such as texturing, as well as advanced methods, such as meshing. Among the 35 tutorials I closely looked at, six tutorials received five-star ratings from users. I chose these six tutorials as the focus for my analysis, since they seemed to represent the most well-received. In my analyses of these six tutorials, I focused on understanding the technical discourse patterns using the SFG approach. In each tutorial, I identified the field, tenor, and mode. I also looked at

how writers presented themselves and invited readers into the conversation in order to create more immediate, interactive, and personal connections. My analysis further looks at how writers develop a stronger sense of affiliation with readers by looking at the elements of secondary orality.

## **Findings**

In this section, I present my findings and illustrate the nature of MTS tutorials as instructional texts and discourse. I use *Sims 3* tutorials and forum interactions to demonstrate the linguistic formats of the online conversations. I present discrete examples to illustrate how *Sims 3* tutorials in MTS create particular ways of interaction. At the same time, I show how discourse in tutorials has elements of secondary orality and how these elements promote more interactive learning. The findings suggest particular patterns of discourse in online communication around technical subjects, and offer new insight into how users make sense of instructional texts and writing.

### **Field: What is the Tutorial about**

Borrowing Halliday's (1989) definition, field refers to what the text (tutorial) is about. Tutorials in MTS are instructional texts that mostly relate to creating 3D objects for *The Sims*. The number and content of tutorials is massive and extensive. Many users in MTS use tutorials as their primary learning tool. According to networkdictionary (<http://www.networkdictionary.com/software/t.php>), a tutorial is

a term often used in the computer related training, refers to an instructional lesson that leads the user through key features and functions of things such as software applications, hardware devices, processes, system designs, and programming languages. The tutorial typically is set up as a series of steps that progress through levels of difficulty and understanding. For this reason, the tutorial is best followed in its logical sequence in order to understand all of the elements of what the user is trying to learn (“tutorial”, n.d.).

The main goal of tutorials is to provide an instructional lesson that guides users in order to accomplish their desire to learn specific features or skill sets. Due to the nature of instructional texts, authors of tutorials apply linear steps to give instructions; at the same time, they state clear goals, prerequisite skills or knowledge, and materials needed. Additionally, they use the title as the initial communication tool to state what the tutorial is about.

**Title.** First MTS users browse the titles of tutorials on the tutorial forum. When the title covers their desired content, they click the title, and it leads them to the whole instructional lesson. Thus, the title has an important role in the instructional lesson, which is to grab users’ or learners’ attention and engage them. According to Hartley (2004), the aim of the title is to describe the content by using the fewest words possible. Titles in general are so important that the site’s owner posted guidelines for creating titles. Concise titles with adequate information were needed because, in 2004, MTS had too many customized wallpapers and floorings, which require only lower level modding skills. The site owner proposed providing adequate information through titles in order to save other users’ time and effort when navigating the site to find tutorials related to specific objects and skills.

Additionally, when uploading wallpaper or flooring, PLEASE include in the thread title the style and type of wall or floor. I don't want to see another "7 new wallpapers" in the submission queue, else I'll go mad.  
Thanks (MTS post, Dec 29, 2004)

This post is related to titles for content submissions, not tutorial titles. However, the site owner emphasized the importance of adequate and concise titles because there are so many uploaded objects, so creators need to be more specific to help users navigate all the stuff. Even though this guideline is not directly related to the tutorial titles, it represents the general expectation that creators and authors provide concise information about whatever kind of content they create through the title. This expectation is now a general norm in MTS, and most users are aware of it. Through concise titles, users are able to navigate content of tutorials and to have a better understanding of each tutorial. The six tutorial writers studied here provide succinct information through their titles that demonstrate common expectations. The titles of six tutorials are included below.

1. Ambitions Tattoos for Dummies with Adobe Photoshop CS4 or CS5 and Tattoinator Convert
2. Clothing Meshing for Dummies
3. Converting an Image for Tattoos Using Tattoinator Convert
4. Converting Skirts For Dudes
5. How to do Lipstick for *Sims3*!
6. Transparent clothing meshes

The titles themselves present the target goal or objects that users want to create, the skill level needed to complete the tutorial, and the pre-requisite tools.

Through these six tutorials, users can learn to create clothing, tattoos, shirts for men, and lipstick. Some titles use the phrase “for dummies” to indicate the appropriate skill level needed. The words “for dummies” refers to the *For Dummies* series of instructional books published by Wiley. “For dummies” indicates that the instruction is for readers who are relatively new to the topic. It does not mean, however, that anybody can use the tutorial. For example, “Clothing Meshing for Dummies” is not for very beginners in modding, because being able to mesh requires many other skills.

Some tutorials also give information about tools that readers specifically need to make the targeted objects. For “Converting an Image for Tattoo Using Tattooinator Convert,” users need to have the Tattooinator program to create customized tattoos for *The Sims*. The program is free to download and use. The title requests that users get Tattooinator if they want to use the tutorial. The other title—“Ambitions Tattoos for Dummies with Adobe Photoshop CS4 or CS5 and Tattooinator”—requires *Adobe® Photoshop® CS4 or CS5* and Tattooinator. The original Tattooinator uses GIMP to operate the program. GIMP is a free photo-editing program while *Photoshop®* is paid one. Many MTS users use GIMP because of free, however, many users in MTS also use *Photoshop®*. Thus, this author want to help users who want to create tattoos by using *Photoshop® CS4 or CS5* and Tattooinator.

These concise titles establish the content of tutorials, their purpose, their requirements, and their expectations through these short descriptions. However, all tutorial writers do not follow the same format for titles. Their formats of titles



are diverse. Someone posts levels of tutorial and required materials rather than only focusing on the particular task that the tutorial addresses. As Halliday (1989) emphasize, language is not about how people use it. It is about why the system works the way it does in particular context (Gibbons, 2006; Lemke, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004). Community norms shape the authors' assumptions about the knowledge that readers have about the field, and what they believe they have to put into the title for readers to make a decision about whether to even look at a tutorial. This is especially the case in this particular field—MTS, modding Create A Sim, and tutorials—in which the field simultaneously influences and is influenced by the linguistic choices authors make. For example, words, such as Tattooinator and meshing, are necessary for writing concisely and meaningfully for particular *Sims* players who want to create tattoos and clothing for *The Sims*. Thus, authors should be able to assume a certain level of understanding of this field on the part of the readers. That shapes how they write the titles. The field influences author of tutorials to write the title based on their knowledge of the community and what they would expect the average person to know about the field.

**Goals of tutorial lessons.** When users click the tutorial thread, it opens the whole text like a blog post. Commonly, the tutorials identify the objectives of the lessons. Four of the six tutorials referenced above start with a narrative form of listing goals while the other two tutorials use a list format. They wrote relatively short descriptions and started instruction immediately. Authors of these two tutorials are non-native English speakers and the short descriptions might

reflect language barriers. Table 5 provides each tutorial's focus and specific goals.

Table 5

*Focus of tutorials*

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Title of tutorial	What tutorials will cover
1. Transparent Clothing Meshes	<p>We've known for some time how to make a clothing texture transparent or semi-transparent. The obstacle to more variety of see-through clothing is how to make a mesh that's transparent - that lets whatever's behind it show through instead of showing the skin texture under the clothing texture. While trying to solve another problem I stumbled across a method that works (isn't that always the way?) and that's what this is about. This is an overview for modders familiar with working with textures and meshes - it's not a good place for beginners to start.</p>
2. Converting an Image for Tattoo Using Tattooinator Convert	<p>What this tutorial will do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Show you how to convert an image using Tattooinator using three example images.</li><li>• Show you what kind of results you can expect and suggest a couple of ways to improve them.</li></ul> <p>What it will not do:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Teach you how to use a graphics program.</li></ul>
3. Converting Skirts for Dudes	<p>So I've gotten I few questions on how I made my skirts for males. Here I will show you the steps I took. I will not be showing you how to use the programs needed, but since you're here you probably know how to already. I will be converting the mini skirt with the belt from base game. I'm still trying to fix and simplify the way I say things so just bear with me.</p>
4. Clothing Meshing for Dummies	<p>All lessons will cover making a custom clothing part start to finish. The topics I hope to cover eventually are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. A simple mesh alteration (beginner meshing)</li><li>2. Adding a pregnant morph (morphs)</li><li>3. Adding vertices and faces to a mesh (bones, vertex renumbering, morphs)</li><li>4. Adding a new part to a mesh (more on faces, UV mapping)</li></ol>

---

The presentation of the purpose and goals are different based on the authors' choices. However, the authors of the first four tutorials clearly define their main goals and list even what tutorials will not cover. Additionally, the authors of the first and third tutorials use narrative writing, while the authors of the second and fourth tutorials display goals in a linear format. Listing which is a linear format is more likely to be found in other formal instructional texts because narrative format can be more confused and less direct. Even though any format that can be less clear is not recommended by experts in technical writing, this narrative and conversational format is pervasively used in MTS.

The interesting common element in both formats is that they all try to make personal connections. The first and third tutorials start the sentence with the first-person pronouns "*we*" and "*I*" to create more informal and comfortable conversation styles which is opposite of what technical writing experts suggest (Blake & Bly, 1993). However, these personal pronouns create a less distanced and more inclusive instructional text that can promote affiliation among writers and users in MTS. Although the second and fourth tutorials display their goals in linear ways of explaining their goals and focuses, they also use the personal pronouns "*you*" and "*I*" to describe their goals.

Another interesting element that is commonly observed in the opening section of tutorials is setting expectations and identifying required skills of users. Some authors clearly state, "it's not a good place for beginners to start" (MTS post, July 6, 2011), or "what it will not do: teach you how to use a graphics program" (MTS post, March 28, 2010). Another example states, "I will not be

showing you how to use the program needs, but since you're here you probably know how to already” (MTS post, July 22, 2011). These requirements instruct users to check their tool kits and skill sets before beginning to use tutorials. Some of the tutorials are too difficult for beginning modders who have not developed other requisite skills to use meshing. Typically, beginning modders use photo-editing software or simple programs such as *Sims Bodyshop*, which is already provided in the game. Meshing is a more advanced skill that involves more programs. These clear guidelines encourage users to make decisions about which tutorials to use and to take steps to acquire the tools or skills if they are not already present. Learners decide their own learning paths relying on their own choices.

**Materials needed.** Most instructional texts clearly state materials needed for lessons. For example, in a recipe, they are listed as ingredients. In the chemistry lab, they are called equipment. In a lesson plan, they are referred to as materials. In each case, it is important to have them ready before beginning. Five of the tutorials in this study list the needed materials. Appendix F shows the list of required materials in each tutorial. The first tutorial does not add the materials in the text because the required materials are already listed in the title, such as *Photoshop*® and Tattoinator. One example that has two styles of listing materials is shown below.

What you need:  
CAS Texture+Unitool  
[www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=364926](http://www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=364926)

For this tutorial I use Photoshop and my Photoshop....(MTS post, December 5, 2009)

The first part of the list is the style that is commonly observed in any instructional text. Some authors list all materials using bullets, numbers, or just the name. One of the more useful elements in materials lists in MTS is the links. Tutorial authors commonly provide links for programs, such as CAS Texture+Unitool, so that users who do not have certain programs can download the required materials. This networked, distributed online context makes it easy to share information. Linguistic choices, such as links, are expected from authors, and they influence online contexts (Hayes & Lee, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004). This simple consideration helps users save time finding the recommended programs for the tutorials. Some authors even explain the character of each program (check the materials list of “Clothing Meshing for Dummies” in the Appendix 6).

The other style that authors often use is narrative form. In the second part of the previous example, the author states, “for this tutorial I use Photoshop....” Many other authors list materials in a similar way. For example, this is a requirement of “Transparent Clothing Meshes:”

What you'll need: CTU, SimGeomEditor from ....'s Small Tools collection (<http://www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=372169>), s3pe, the graphics editor of your choice, MorphMaker. If you chop up a mesh, you may find the beta of MorphMatcher useful: <http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=442393>. If you do a complete job including lod 3, you'll need to know the BloomsBase method of adding a mesh to a CAS part using s3pe: <http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=445332> (MTS post, July 6, 2011)

Although the author can use bullets or numbers, which are common in typical instructional texts, this author chose to use a narrative format, which is not recommended in formal instructional texts. This narrative description of materials can be more confusing than providing a list. Even though the narrative has links, it could still be difficult to follow. The narrative style in MTS tutorials is opposite of what expert technical writers suggest. Blake and Bly (1993) and Casady (1992) recommend that authors of technical writing should format their content to make it easy for users to follow. This narrative information for prerequisites is commonly observed in MTS tutorials with another popular format, listing or a series of numbering. Even though this form does not follow suggestions from experts in technical writing, these authors write instructional texts that seem to be effective, based on user ratings, and that foster a more personal tone. Thus, the MTS environment in which any advanced knowledge holders can write instructions invites various ways of writing instructional texts to accomplish both the sharing of information as well as building interpersonal relationships among participants.

In summary, tutorials are an instructional text that aims to teach how to accomplish certain tasks. These six tutorial writers follow some aspects of suggested technical writing elements, such as concise titles, clear directions, and linear instructions (Blake & Bly, 1993; Casady, 1992; Hartley, 2004). However, the online context of the MTS affinity space expands the language features in these instructional texts, following the argument of SFG scholars that the context influences linguistic choices (Gibbons, 2006; Halliday & Hasan, 1989:

Schleppegrell ,2004; 2012). MTS authors do not limit themselves to follow typical formats for writing instructional texts, because they are responding to the interpersonal expectations of participants in the space.

### **Mode: The Organization of the Text**

Mode is the channel of communication. It represents the resources of the language system that are drawn from to meet expectations for how particular texts should be organized (Hayes & Lee, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004). According to Halliday and Hasan (1989), mode is also related to “the symbolic organization of the text ...and its function in the context, including the channel and rhetorical mode” (p.12). To understand the mode of tutorials, I identified the linguistic choices and aspects of textual organization to draw similarities between MTS tutorials and other instructional texts. User manuals and MTS tutorials share many common elements of instructional writing. Both share linear and easy to follow formats, and both include visuals to illustrate the lessons. The mode of MTS tutorials follows the most traditional instructional writing elements; however, MTS tutorials use screenshots to show the steps. Sometimes they use screenshots as the main communication channel. Below, I illustrate how tutorial authors meet the conventional elements of instructional writing as well as keep their personal writing styles and create new ways of giving instructions influenced by context of MTS.

**Pictures are a series of numbers.** All six tutorials use many screenshots to give instructions in an accurate and easy-to-follow way. Although traditional



user manuals also rely on visuals to give instructions, authors of MTS tutorials use visuals as a numbering system and as confirmation points that help users check their comprehension. The importance of using pictures and screenshots can be easily seen in the tutorial forums. When beginning writers upload a tutorial with no visuals, other advanced users recommend adding screenshots or pictures. Here is a comment from an experienced user who is known as the “Mad Poster” in the MTS community. The Mad Poster writes to a beginner, “just to say, you may want to add a few pics, to help the beginners” (MTS post, July 11, 2009). A comment from the site owner, shown below, also recommended adding pictures, too.

Couple of points:

- Between step 4 and 5 you are missing which tab to click on.
- As ... says you should probably add pictures.

Also, don't call it a "Tute". It's not a "Tute" it's a tutorial. Please rename it. (MTS post, July 11, 2009)

Even the site owner uses the word—should—which is a directive and puts pressure on the author to add pictures. These two comments indicate that screenshots are an expected instructional element in MTS tutorials. Users do not want to see the pictures for decorative reasons. They want to see the pictures for clarification of information and to make the tutorial easier to follow.

Additionally, the owner of the site suggested using the conventional word—tutorial—instead of—tute—in the title. Even though many users in MTS use “tute” in conversations, authors are expected to use the proper convention in the title. This indicates that tutorials should be taken seriously in this community.

The other substantial role of pictures in tutorials is their use as checkpoints before users move on in the instruction. Authors use screenshots as an indicator that the next step is coming and as a check point so that users can make sure they have followed all instructions. The numbers of pictures in the six tutorials indicates how much these authors relied on screenshots to give instructions. I saved six tutorials in a PDF format to reserve the data and for easy printing. Table 6 provides the numbers of pictures in each tutorial.

Table 6

*Information about screenshots in tutorials*

Tutorial title	Number of	
	Pages in PDF file	Screenshots
Ambitions Tattoos for Dummies with Adobe Photoshop CS4 or CS5 and Tattoinator	8	8
Clothing Meshing for Dummies	28	27
Converting an Image for Tattoos Using Tattoinator Convert	10	9
Converting Skirts For Dudes	12	13
How to Do Lipstick for Sims3!	7	13
Transparent Clothing Meshes	6	6

*Note.* As of February 11, 2012.

Almost each page has at least one screenshot. The ratio of pages to pictures is nearly 1/1 in MTS tutorials, which indicates how much authors rely on screenshots in their instructions. I also compared the usage of visuals in

commercial manuals such as the PDF online version of *Using Adobe®Photoshop CS5*” updated December 5, 2011. It does not provide screenshots after each description. It uses screenshots at critical moments, while MTS tutorials authors provide screenshots on each page. As I explained above, authors use screenshots as checkpoints for checking users’ comprehension and as indicators that the next step is coming. The tutorial, “How to do Lipstick for *Sims3!*,” is one exceptional case which has more pictures than page numbers. The author of this tutorial explained the reason why he uses many images in his tutorials. The author stated, “I used many images because it is a little hard for me to explain it in English” (MTS post, December 5, 2009). The authors of the other five tutorials used in this study gave descriptive and lengthy written instruction and added screenshots following their description in order to help users visualize what they instructed readers to do. Each screenshot helps users understand what is written. For example, here is a lengthy start-up description.

Then start Milkshape. Click on the Groups tab on the right side of the window, and clear the 'Auto Smooth' checkbox. Click 'File' on the menu and go to Preferences, click the Misc tab, and change the 'Joint Size' to something like 0.015. (If you get weird shading effects or if you open a mesh and see a mess of blue circles, you've forgotten to do one of these steps.) Optionally, you can click the Joints tab on the right side of the window and clear the 'Show Skeleton' checkbox, so you won't see the underlying skeleton while working with the mesh. (The examples will have the skeleton hidden.) (MTS post, March 28, 2010)

This direction is very clear and easy to follow. It only contains six steps plus one more optional step. However, it can be complicated for some users who can easily miss one small step that can impact the user’s ability to carry out further instructions. After the author gives written directions, the author added this

screenshot for confirmation and more accurate instruction that highlights the main points (see Figure 12).

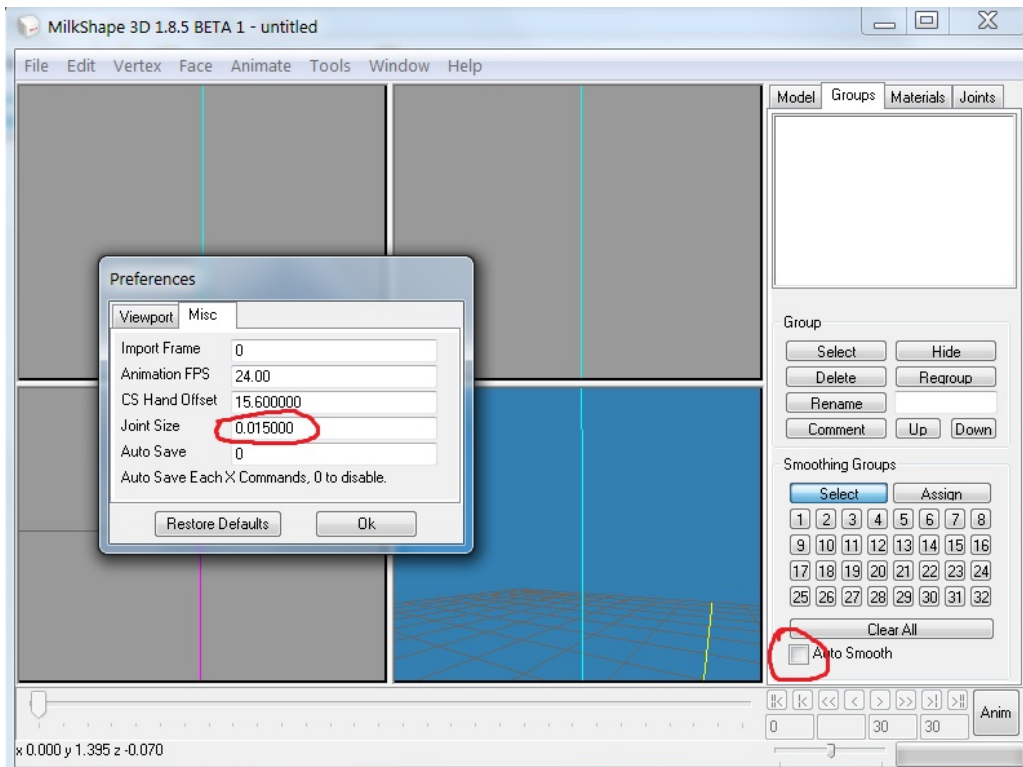


Figure 12. The first screenshot from “Clothing Meshing for Dummies” among 27 pictures.

This author has edited the screenshot to emphasize the main points in the directions with red marks that direct readers to pay more attention to those steps. Each time authors provide a screenshot after their description; users can check their comprehension and decide whether they are ready to move on. Thus, each screenshot works like an indicator that users will have a new step after the screenshot. Authors do not need to use numbering or linear instructions to give clear steps. The screenshot itself works much better in online contexts than numbers for giving instructions. Using modified screenshots as a series of numbers is a new mode of organizing instructional texts.

**Talking through screenshots.** When authors use screenshots, they frequently modify them to highlight the main points. The screenshot in Figure 12 demonstrates how authors mark a screenshot to draw attention to the important points. This method represents an example of using visual as a secondary communicational mode. However, one tutorial, “How to do Lipstick for *Sims3!*,” demonstrates that screenshots can also be the primary communicational mode in instructional texts. The tutorial is written by a non-English speaker for users in English online community. Due to the language barriers, the author needs to find a way of overcome language difficulty. Thus, this author uses a screenshot to give instructions rather than using language as a primary communicational mode. Because of the language difficulty, the author gave a very short introductory text and then started the steps immediately. Additionally, the written instruction for each number is very short. For example, she wrote “1-Open CTU” and added the screenshot (Figure 13).

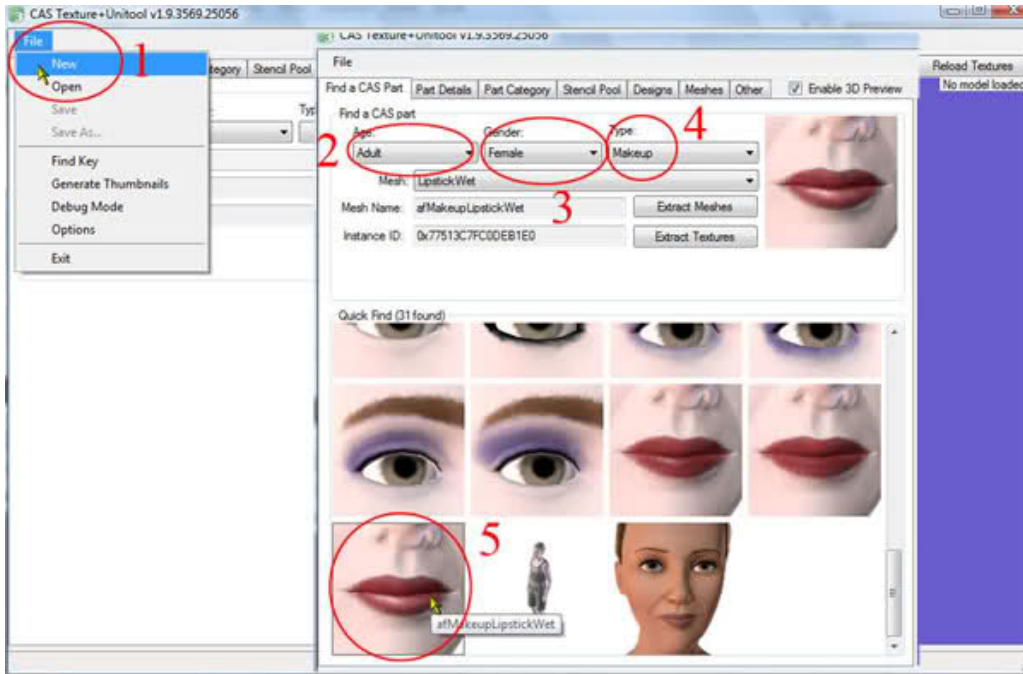


Figure 13. The first screenshot from “How to do Lipstick for Sims 3” in the tutorial among 13 screenshots.

This author gives instructions right on the screenshot instead of giving descriptive instructional texts. The number gives the order of the steps and what users are supposed to do. Each instruction is numbered in the order the step should be completed for using the CTU program. The author gives relatively short descriptive instructions before the screenshot as all other writers do but then provides the screenshot as a comprehensive instruction. The example in Figure 14 only has red marks with numbers that highlight where users should look before moving to the next step. This author has difficulty writing long, descriptive instructions in English. Thus, the author found an alternative way to communicate, which is the screenshot as the primary mode. Through adding numbers to this screenshot, this author gives very clear and accurate instructions regarding what users should check to make their own lipstick without lengthy

written descriptions which is her weakness. She adds another screenshot without any written instruction between Figures 13 and 14.

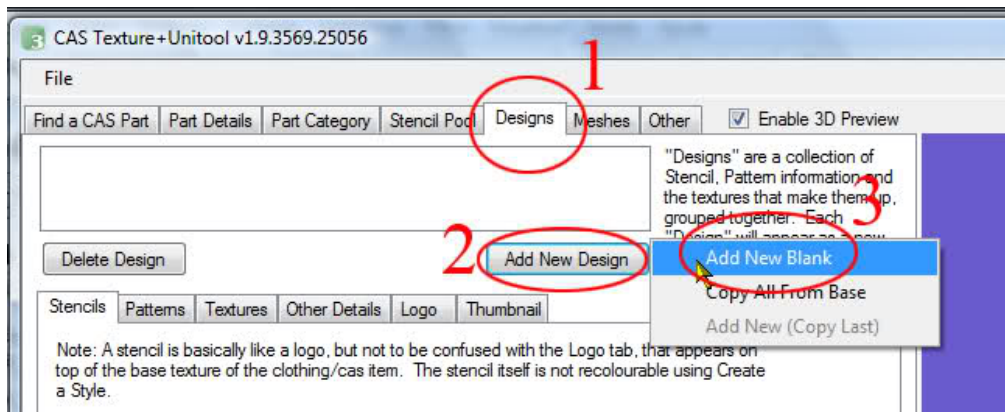


Figure 14. The second screenshot in the “How to do Lipstick for Sims3!” among 13 screenshots.

This screen also has numbers and red marks to give directions. The entire tutorial gives instructions this way with only short descriptions. This author uses numbers to divide the main steps in the tutorial. The author uses 13 screenshots, which are edited to show the order of specific steps to be taken. The author comes up with a different instructional method compared to other tutorial writers by using the screenshot itself as the primary communication tool. The high number of hits on this tutorial (11,795 as of February 11, 2012) testifies to its usefulness. This tutorial also got five stars, which indicates that users think it is “spectacular.” Although this example is a common case, it demonstrates that people can understand the instructions through numbered screenshots. It demonstrates the power that images have to teach software programs. It also shows that images can even be used as the main communicative mode in instructional texts. Overall, text is the main communicative mode in written

tutorials, and it is often presented in a linear way; however, images such as the screenshots in this case can make the instructions more clear and accurate in a linear format.

In summary, MTS tutorial authors follow suggested technical writing practices of using a linear format combined with visuals (Blake & Bly, 1993; Casady, 1992). According to systematic functional linguists, the context encourages MTS users to choose linguistic elements that fit in this particular context (Halliday & Hasan, 1989; Gibbons, 2006; Lemke, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2004). The context—instructional texts in an online community—leads these authors to use visuals, such as screenshots, to give clear instructions. However, these authors modify their writing practice to incorporate screenshots into their tutorials in a way that is most effective for MTS users. Authors not only provide screenshots for visualizing their descriptive instruction, but they also use them as an indication that it is time to move to the next step. In addition, one case provides the example that screenshots can be a main communication mode for instruction. These examples represent the power of visuals in instructional texts and introduce a different perspective on visuals in communication. In the next section, I explain how these user-generated tutorials invite readers/learners into the instructional texts and facilitate access to other instructional resources from outside of the tutorials.



### **Tenor: Interpersonal Function**

Tenor is affected by how individuals position themselves in the relationship, how language users “feel” each other, and the frequency of *contact* (Gibbons, 2006). These relationships are influenced by social roles and circumstances. Authors of traditional user manuals, including instructional texts such as cookbooks and craft books, do not expect to develop a relationship with readers. Additionally, readers do not expect to be able to ask writers for clarification. Instructional manuals are impersonal because writers/ instructors give lessons through the texts not through interactions. When users take the lesson, there is no instructor in the learning context.

These instructional texts have distance between writers and readers and instructors and learners because the purpose of the text is to help a learner complete a alone rather than with instructors and learners together. The common suggestions from technical writing experts, such as “do not use personal pronouns,” represents how instructional texts create distance between writers and readers. We can see “*you*” but cannot find “*I*” or “*we*” in user manuals. Writers tend to be objective and do not establish emotional ties to any readers. However, tutorials in MTS create a very collective relationship between writers and readers that is contextualized depending on the individual’s needs and abilities. Writers and users share the affiliation of pursuing the same interest in MTS, which may reduce distance between authors and readers. Authors/instructors invite users/ learners into instructional texts and further interaction as well as let other

experienced members into the conversation of instruction in this online affinity space.

**I, you, and we.** One element that can define tenor is status, which is the way of positioning individuals in relationships (Gibbons, 2006). Authors can create distance from readers through the use of authoritative voice when providing instructional texts. The common example of voice that brings the reader closer to the author is when the author puts himself/herself as the actor/actress in the story. The way authors position themselves creates the tone of text. Because the primary goal is to give instructions, the tenor of instructional text automatically places the reader in a subordinate position as a novice who must simply follow directions. This relationship between knowledge producers and knowledge consumers creates a one-way communication from producers to consumers. There is no circumstance in which these producers and consumers can act as—*we*—in traditional formats of instructional texts. However, authors of the six tutorials studied here all use personal pronouns including—I, you, and we. The usage of personal pronouns varies. However, they set the tone of the text by telling their stories about why they decided to write tutorials and how they started.

Table 7 shows five examples from five tutorials of the way these writers started. I did not correct their spelling mistakes in order to present the raw data.

Table 7

*Beginning statements of tutorials*

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Title of tutorial	First paragraph from five tutorials
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1. Transparent Clothing Meshes	We've known for some time how to make a clothing texture transparent or semi-transparent (MTS post, July 6, 2011).
2. Clothing Meshing for Dummies	There are other custom clothing and meshing guides out there, but since I'm still a dummy when it comes to a lot of this stuff I thought I'd be qualified to write a tutorial that tries to be very beginner-friendly. Like you, I'll be learning some of this as I go along (MTS post, March 28, 2010).
3. Converting skirts for Dudes	So I've gotten I few questions on how I made my skirts for males. Here I will show you the steps I took (MTS post, July 22, 2011).
4. Converting an Image for Tattoo Using Tattooinator Convert	I've added a Convert function to Tattooinator, and a quickie tutorial may be helpful to people using it. Here it is (MTS post, January 22, 2011).
5. How to do Lipstick for Sims3!	For this tutorial I use Photoshop and my Photoshop is in portuguse but if you need something to be translate just tell me. I tried to do everything right in this tutorial but if something is not well I appreciate that you correct me 😊 (MTS post, December 5, 2009).

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These authors establish an affiliation with their readers by telling their stories.

These instructions prepare readers by engaging them in instructions instead of distancing them. The first, second, and third examples start with the authors' stories about why they write tutorials. It is similar to a narrative in an essay that provides a backstory before authors tell their main stories. These three narratives give readers an easy start and help them to understand the authors' own perspectives. Through telling their personal narratives using “*we*” or “*Like you*” authors invite readers into their story and create the feeling that authors are also members in MTS rather than authoritative knowledge providers.

When authors start with the first-person plural form of—*we*—they do so to indicate—*you*—as readers and—*I*—as a writer have the same information and

difficulties when making better transparent or semi-transparent clothing. This author positioned herself/ himself as one of the members in MTS rather than as a knowledge expert superior to the reader. At the end of the second example, the author tells the readers “like you, I’ll be learning some of this as I go along” (MTS post, March 28, 2010). This is how the author acknowledges that she will also be accomplishing something along with the users. The author positioned herself as co-learner through the tutorials. In addition, the author of the third tutorial told his story about why he decided to write the tutorial. He tells readers “here I will show you the steps I took” (MTS post, July 22, 2011) instead of telling the readers that they need to follow his instructions and directions. He genuinely wanted to share his work instead of putting himself forward as the authority of the instruction. In another example through the tutorials, one author states, “let’s get started,” (MTS post, March 28, 2010) and “let’s try the same....” (MTS post, March 28, 2010). Using—*let’s*—indicates that this author wants to participate with readers instead of as a superior authority. These examples illustrate that tutorial writers position themselves a one of the members in MTS similar to readers who are the members of the same community. Grounded in this affiliation, authors do not identify themselves as knowledge authorities above readers or other members. They include users in the instructional texts, because it decreases distance from readers.

**Follow-up discussion.** Another aspect of tenor is contact (Gibbons, 2006). Contact refers to the frequency of interaction and the degree to which authors and readers get to know each other through their interactions. In

traditional instructional texts, writers and readers do not expect to interact with each other. Readers follow the directions in the text, which they are supposed to accomplish on their own. When they have questions or are confused, they must overcome the difficulty by themselves or use other resources. Compared to these typical expectations from traditional instructional texts, the social circumstances in MTS fertilize discussions while readers use tutorials.

In this affinity space (Gee, 2004), writers and readers share their interests. These people—writers and readers—want to pursue their goals together in a collaborative effort. The common atmosphere in this affinity space fosters sharing creations, skills, knowledge, and personal concerns. Grounded in this culture, when people make mistakes, others help them find the right solutions to fix their mistakes. Many users of the six tutorials studied here expanded the instruction from tutorials to the discussion thread where authors and users directly interact. This online context allows authors and users interactions less influenced by different times and places.

In addition, the openness of discussion to others invites even other users into the instructional discussions. This online context reflects oral elements (Ong, 2002) to promote immediate, interactive, and more personal instructions among authors, readers, and other resource persons through textual responses. Even though responses are exchanged in a written format from different physical places and times, the volume and immediacy of the responses create a context similar to having all these people co-present for accomplishing a task. In addition,

individualized questions and responses for specific questions demonstrate learning through tutorials that is more assisted and supportive.

Table 8 shows the volumes of interaction of each tutorial.

Table 8

*Numbers of replies and viewed from other MTS users of tutorials*

Tutorial title	Replies	Viewed
Ambitions Tattoos for Dummies with Adobe Photoshop CS4 or CS5 and Tattoinator convert	8	6,243
Clothing Meshing for Dummies	65	21,501
Converting an Image for Tattoos Using Tattoinator Convert	8	30,778
Converting Skirts For Dudes	4	1,238
How to do Lipstick for Sims3!	33	11,947
Transparent Clothing Meshes	34	6,396

*Note.* As of February 16, 2012.

Under each tutorial, users ask for clarification for instructions, provide suggestions, report faults when they use the tutorials, and show their appreciation. The volume of responses is different for each tutorial. Three tutorials— Clothing Meshing for Dummies, How to do Lipstick for Sims3, Transparent Clothing Meshes—have more questions related to using meshing programs, which is considered an advanced modding skill. Replies are from readers, authors, and other advanced users hoping to accomplish their own versions of the creations. Here are some examples of requests for clarification, suggestions, and reports. I

use QR for questions from readers, AA for answers from authors, AO for answers from other members, and RR for responses from readers. I also did not correct spelling and punctuation mistakes to reserve the raw data.

QR: Hey I really want to thank you for your tutorial! 👍👍👍

I successfully (kind of ) made the male hodie longer, yay~ but then I tried it in game and something's not right with the skin on the neck...It doesn't happen with the original hoodie or any other clothing though...is there any way to fix it?

Thankssss ! 😊 (MTS post, October 23, 2010 at 1:03 PM)

AA: Did you forget to uncheck Auto Smooth when you set up Milkshape? That could cause the seam effect at the neck. If so, you'll have to start over and do the mesh again.

If it's not Auto Smooth, did you do anything to the vertices at the neck?  
(MTS post, October 24, 2010 at 5:57 AM)

RR: arhh~~~the box has been checked again somehow repeated the procedures and it worked great! thankyou sooooo much! =D now looking into UV mapping to fix the texture lol can't wait to have my first work done 🥰 thanks thanks~~ 😊 (MTS post, October 24, 2010 at 10:22 AM)

This kind of interaction is present throughout the tutorial threads. Individual readers ask about their own problems or concerns regarding the instructions or unexpected results in their creations. Then often times, the author responds or gives guidance based on the questions and concerns. The response time is relatively quick and detailed for individual cases.

As I already stated above, many other informed/advanced users provide advice to beginner modders or writers. This example shows the suggestions that two advanced members offered.

RR: It looks like you aren't using the latest version of the Unitool, trebtreb. The latest version has four tabs, with "find a mesh" as the top one. (MTS post, July 12, 2009 at 12:38 A.M.)

AR: Thanks for pointing that out, I've updated the tutorial. (MTS post, July 12, 2009 at 3:18 A.M.)

The advanced member gave this advice one day after the author uploaded the tutorial. Based on other member's information, the author rewrote the tutorial and uploaded it again less than three hours later. The tutorial authors write instructions based on their own experiences; thus, they use the software they currently have, which may not always be the newest version due to and the high rate at which software is updated. More experienced or informed users in MTS point this out and help other authors update their tutorials. The quick response and the quality of advice immediately improves the tutorial content and provides better tutorials to other users. This promptness of responses and individualized attention helps develop an affiliation among writers and readers, even though they do not see each other face-to-face.

The involvement of advanced members is not limited to improving tutorials. Advanced members also participate in discussions and bring their own knowledge into the instruction.

QR: It sais in photo shop after i do everything else right that the files or something isnt supported. i have the Nvidia stuff and everything...can i be exporting them to the wrong place? i made a folder in user/documents/SIMS3MESHES/...worked for other things. its frustrating! plase help! (MTS post, June 13, 2010 at 5:46 A.M.)

AO: If you get an error that the dds type is supported then you still need the dds plugin. After downloading it you need to install it. (MTS post, June 13, 2010 at 7:45 A.M.)



This example shows a response from another member instead of from an author. Commonly authors provide answers and guidance fairly soon after the tutorials are uploaded. However, any other users can get involved in the discussion and respond to questions. None of the tutorial writers are offended; rather they really appreciate others' support. This example also shows the immediateness of response for learners. This learner got the solution for an individual problem in two hours. Instructions in MTS are not only limited to tutorials from authors. Providing instructions is open to any other members who can be another instructor in the learning process. Authors and readers also welcome these second instructors in their learning. Through these follow-up discussions, authors and readers have frequent enough contact to develop close feelings in the process of learning. At the same time, involvement of other members in the instruction creates the feeling that learning occurs flows in many directions from instructors to learners; from learners to instructors, and from other informed users to learners, rather than from just one direction—from instructor to learner.

In summary, tutorial authors position themselves on the same level as members in MTS. They do not take the role of an authoritative knowledge provider. This social context encourages authors to consider readers as members in MTS who build an affiliation together rather than anonymous learners who do not interact with authors. Because they want to affiliate themselves with readers, authors use the personal pronoun “we” and “I” naturally bringing users into the text and contextually accepting these language choices, even though tutorials are instructional texts. In addition, this online context revitalizes orality (Ong, 2002)

in instructional texts by expanding instruction from the text to discussions. In oral culture, instructors and learners have traditionally been required to be in the same place at the same time to interact. The Internet provides the means for authors, readers, and other informed users to interact while less influenced by physical and time differences. Through these interactions, authors, readers, and resourceful users create an effective and immediate instructional space with personalized and cooperative support.

### **Discussion**

My analysis identified the linguistic choices tutorial writers used to develop different forms of instructional texts that are influenced by the online context in MTS. These linguistic choices include certain ways of defining the field of tutorials, organizing the communicational mode, and the way authors, readers, and other members in MTS build relationships. I explored how tutorial writers follow certain elements of instructional writing to develop informal lessons with concise titles, clear objectives, lists or description of pre-requisite materials and skills, and linear steps for giving instructions.

In addition, my findings discuss the importance of visuals in instructional texts as well as the different way of using visuals in MTS tutorials. In this online context, visuals cannot only be used as a supportive mode of communication, but they can also be used as the primary communicational mode. As Halliday (1991) emphasized, a theory of language is more about “explaining why the system

works the way it does” (p.6) rather than understanding only how people use language. MTS users expect and push instructors to use many visuals, which fills the gap created by a lack of face-to-face instruction. Because the instructional goals in MTS involve learning how to create 3D objects, tutorials teach how to use software programs. In the context of learning software, screenshots are important as main visuals that can show how software programs should be used correctly. In addition, authors edit screenshots to highlight the important parts that users should pay attention to on the screenshot. The authors’ abilities to take screenshots and to edit them allow them to rely on visuals in their instructions and create expectations for the users. The screenshots confirm understanding, clarify instructions, and signal the users to move to the next step. In addition, one example displays that a screenshot itself can be the primary communication mode to give instructions. Instructors can communicate through well-designed visuals.

The online context not only requires using visuals in instructional lessons but it creates an environment in which orality is adopted into their interactions and communications. Tutorials in MTS are instructional texts, but they are grounded in affiliations that cannot be observed in common print contexts. This environment creates an affiliation among authors and readers through sharing authors’ and users’ interests. Authors consider themselves as advanced members rather than a master of certain skills or authorities of knowledge. This philosophy influences their linguistic choices—we and I—in instructional texts. They include readers in their instructional texts from the start. This reduces the distance between writers and readers and instructors and learners. Including

readers into the tutorial writing process creates the atmosphere that instructors and learners can learn together rather than learners are only following the previous steps instructors accomplished. They also encourage readers to create their own learning path depending on their interests. They do not expect all readers to go through the exact same path in the tutorials. They inspire readers to become owners of their own learning processes rather than passive learners. In addition, they even request readers' feedbacks about their content, their skills, and writing formats.

In addition, informational technology and online spaces allow readers to provide instant responses to authors and to request clarification from authors. Readers report errors in the instruction, suggest better programs, and share their own difficulties. Authors provide individualized answers and advice to individual users. Many advanced members answer questions from users and bring other perspectives to the instruction. Authors of tutorials appreciate other members' support and their knowledge. They do not feel threatened by authority. All these elements create close kinships among authors, readers, and other members in the learning process that is commonly observed in oral culture (Ong, 2002).

My analysis focused on only six tutorials and presented discrete examples of tutorials and follow-up discussions. I cannot make generalizations about other instructional texts or interactions in MTS or other instructional environments. However, my analysis of the tutorials and interactions related to them contribute to a new perspective toward developing instructional texts. In the process of developing instructional texts, learners should not be excluded. Authors of

tutorials show how instructional texts can invite readers into the instruction instead of creating distance. Furthermore, instructional texts can encourage learners to become owners of their learning instead of passive followers. Follow-up discussions demonstrate that learning does not only occur within instructional texts. The instructional text can be just an initial step. Tutorial writers allow other members to be part of the instruction that, in effect, becomes a collaborative work. All people—authors of tutorials (instructors), tutorial users (learners), and other informed users (other instructors)—present instruction. It is collaborative and multi-directional rather than one-directional from the instructor to learners. This online community and context fabricates a unique linguistic system that uses instructional texts to establish instructions as collaborative work. As well as, it shows an example of an affinity space where people are designing their own texts, discussing them, adding to them, and collaboratively building the set of knowledge. Currently, there is much attention being directed towards the rise of digital textbooks, and their potential for customization by individual educators for particular classes. My analysis of MTS suggests that involving users in the process of creating texts can also be beneficial.

This online affinity space rapidly changes by adopting environmental and technical updates into its interactions and instructions. We need to know more about how instructional texts and all sources are created and used in these online affinity spaces. We also need empirical studies that apply this new process of collaboratively developing instructional texts to other instructional settings, especially in school instruction.

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## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

I investigated an online gaming community to understand the nature of this affinity space by looking at the different kinds of learning that take place at the site. I aimed to explore users' experiences and practices and to understand learning practices that are not commonly observed in formal educational settings. To achieve this goal, I conducted a four-year virtual ethnographic study that followed guidelines set forth in Hine (2000). After Hine, the study focused on understanding the complexity of the relationships between technology and social interactions among people and affinity-space interfaces in real time space.

Through ethnographic observation, I developed three main research focuses: 1) how members, who are not native English speakers, in an online gaming community develop and use specialist language in English; 2) the users' roles in the design process; and 3) how users in this online gaming community learn new skills. I collected different data sets to answer each question. To address the first question, I examined thread posts to understand the social support system in MTS and the language practices of one member who was a non-English speaker when starting out in MTS. For the second question, I gathered thread posts from administrative staff and users in MTS to identify patterns of interactions. Third, I investigated user-generated tutorials to understand the nature of these instructional texts in an online context. I applied Gee's (2004) affinity space theory to identify social and linguistic elements of learning English

as a second language and to make a sense of how the MTS culture promotes and recruits user participation in the site design process. I then analyzed tutorials and thread interactions employing Halliday's (1989) SFG and Ong's (2002) concept of secondary orality to understand the implications of online instructional texts for learning in formal educational settings.

This concluding chapter has three parts. I first review the findings of chapters 2–4 to illustrate how each chapter sheds light on how affinity spaces such as MTS generate user participation and promote collaborative learning. I follow this up with perspectives on the theoretical and practical implications of collaborative online learning. Finally, I share what I learned through conducting virtual ethnography and make suggestions for future research.

### **Review of Findings**

In this section, I review the findings of each chapter. Each set of results illustrates online learning and collaboration in this informal learning place and its implications. My interests in the affinity space guides me to understand what it could teach us about how people learn and how these practices could be applied to formal learning settings. I come to an end with the collective conclusions of three findings.

## **English Language Learning in MTS**

In Chapter 2, I focused on specialist English language learning through participation in MTS. My analysis illustrates that this affinity space has strong potential to provide new platforms for the study of English language learning. Environmental elements and linguistic support from other users in MTS accelerated Nicole's language development. Many scholars in second language learning accentuate the importance of authentic language-learning environments (Cook, 1997; Faltis & Coutler, 2008; Hinkel, 2005; Pennycook, 2010; Valdes, 2004) and interest-driven, motivational language learning (Cary, 2007; de Jong & Haper, 2005). They also emphasize that a comfortable environment is important for language learners to lower affective filters (Krashen, 1994; Huerta-Macías, 2005). These scholars further indicate the value of working collaboratively (Swain 2000; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002) in second language learning.

All of the elements to successfully develop a second language are present in MTS. Nicole had a high interest in developing modding skills in the context of become of affiliated with online peers. Through interactions with online peers that focused on modding, her English language practices were situated in an authentic environment with a collaborative problem-solving process. In this online affinity space, Nicole had many elements that led her to become a successful language learner. This analysis of Nicole's language practices and interactions contributes to research in ways that enlighten our understanding of learning second languages by engaging in digital media. I do not criticize current

second language education but rather want to bring what I learned from this study from informal learning spaces into formal learning settings. This study is a bridge between current practices and what digital media has to offer. Scholars, educators, and policy makers in second language education should see the value of language learning through digital media.

In addition, my analysis of Nicole's participation in MTS reveals the importance of socializing in the affinity space for some people. In MTS, Nicole interacted with various levels of modders to exchange skills and interests. In doing so, she developed an affiliation with many members and made many friends. In addition, she developed into an advanced or skilled modder from her novice status and currently works as a site helper in MTS. Nicole's practices and interactions in MTS not only promoted her modding skills, they facilitated her ability to speak English. The advancement of her language skills were tied to her ability to simultaneously socialize and collaborate to solve technical problems.

Gee and Hayes (2010) pointed out that there is a risk that focusing on socializing too much in interest-driven affinity spaces can lose participants. However, socializing among some members and users creates strong affiliations among online peers that motivate them to advance their practice. Thus, it is important to keep a balance of socializing and pursuing common endeavors in affinity space to keep members actively participating rather than emphasizing one side.

## **Collaborative Design Process in MTS**

In Chapter 3, I explored the patterns of user participation in MTS as a means to understand how this site was created and how it is sustained through high user participation. By analyzing 1,427 posts from the Site News forum, I illustrated how the administrative staff shares their power, leadership, responsibilities, and roles with users. Users, in turn, voluntarily choose their levels of participation depending on their abilities to contribute to the design process. I reviewed design process theory to illuminate the relationship between user participation and learning in MTS and to better understand participatory design. I elucidate four different perspectives on user participation, which included worker's roles in early participatory design, patterns of user participation in product design, technology design, and instructional design.

This broad range of participatory design still faces challenges pertaining to the rebalance of the power relations between designers and users (Kensing & Blomberg, 1998). *Mod The Sims* presents an innovative way of dealing with power by sharing leadership and responsibilities between users and technical experts; between workers and managers; and between users and the administrative staff. By sharing leadership and responsibilities, users take a variety of roles in the design process, and the staff encourages them to recruit better knowledge, skills, and ideas from other users.

My results can inform instructional design practices related to curriculum design not only at the macro level (e.g., school curriculums), but also at the micro level in each classroom where students could learn through their own involvement

in the design process of their own learning. In this way, students can develop ownership of their learning through participation in the instructional design process and become active producers rather than passive consumers. Through understanding the process of online collaboration and learning, educators should realize that there is opportunity for many types of learning and creativity, which then can be studied to see how we create better educational spaces. Finally, my study proposes that we need to think about the ways we teach instead of expecting people to change the way they learn.

### **User-Generated Tutorials in MTS**

In Chapter 4, I explored user-generated, online, instructional texts—tutorials—in MTS. I apply the concept of SFG set forth by Halliday (1989) to understand authors' linguistic choices and how they were influenced by the online context. Systematic Functional Grammar distinguishes among linguistic elements to identify field, tenor, and mode, in this case of user-generated instructional texts. This framework showed how language practices in and around these tutorials in online contexts can revitalize orality in traditionally written, instructional texts. It also creates a perspective that instruction is collaborative and multi-dimensional rather than one-directional from instructor to learners. By analyzing six tutorials, I reveal that visuals can be the primary communication mode in this particular online learning context.

In addition, this online context—affinity space—influences authors to position themselves as part of a community instead of as formal authorities. They

use “we” to show that users and authors belong to the same community and accomplish the tasks together, which reduces the distance between writers and readers. Authors in MTS open their instructional texts to other MTS users and appreciate their input into the instructions through the expanded thread discussions under each tutorial. These subsequent discussions evoke the beneficial elements of primary orality that enhance immediate, interactive, and personalized instructions. My findings illustrate instructional texts can be just the initial step of instruction between authors and users that promotes more instructional interactions not only between authors and readers but also among other informed users. In effect, instruction becomes collaborative work.

### **A Collaborative Learning Place**

My three focuses in this study shed light on how MTS works as a collaborative learning space. The main culture of this site is collaboration and contribution. Grounded on these philosophies, this space has been created and sustained by a collective effort. Administrative staff shares their power with users and users contribute their abilities to the site and share them with others. The site also promotes and encourages users’ participation in various activities. Building on that, users can be part of design teams, become staff, teach other users, write instructions, become language partners, or just lurkers; however, fundamentally they are peers. This horizontal relationship promotes a strong affiliation among users that can promote active user participation. This user participation advocates developing and sustaining this space as a collaborative learning environment.



They play *The Sims* collaboratively, design the site collaboratively, and teach others collaboratively.

Based on Nicole's English learning experiences, for example, I propose that the language learner can have a pool of teachers who provide individualized at different times and from different places rather than the traditional scenario of just one teacher and many students in the classroom. User-generated tutorials show that instructional texts can promote a collaborative learning process. All these activities meet what people in current society want: to share their interests, skills, knowledge, concerns; to learn just-in-time when they need and want to; to have customized preferences; and to learn as part of a collaborative effort and scaffolded environment (Collines & Halverson, 2009). This type of learning prepares people for life styles and expectations of 21st century work places (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996). Next, I discuss the practical and theoretical implications of this study.

### **Implications**

My focuses on user participation and collaboration in MTS have practical implications in language learning and design instruction. They also have implications for using existing theories to analyze practices in online affinity space.

## **Practical Implication**

Many second-language learning scholars emphasize the importance of comfortable, authentic, interest-driven, motivational, and collaborative language learning environments (Cary, 2007; Cook, 1997; de Jong & Haper, 2005; Faltis & Coutler, 2008; Hinkel, 2005; Huerta-Macías, 2005; Krashen, 1994; Pennycook, 2010; Swain 2000; Swain, Brooks, & Tocalli-Beller, 2002; Valdes, 2004). These elements in second language learning are pervasively discussed in the field; however, all these elements are not commonly observed in second-language classrooms. Affinity spaces have to potential to teach us how to create motivational, authentic, and comfortable settings in classroom environments so that students can have a peer-rich experience and get more from their education. In addition, this space demonstrates an innovative learning environment in which a learner can have many teachers rather than just one as in a typical learning environment.

In this online affinity space, people get together for sharing their interests and encourage each other to participate in the space in different ways depending on their skills and knowledge. People join this space with the motivation to know more about their interests, and they leverage each other's knowledge to become experts in their shared interests. Through these highly motivational and interest-driven interactions, they build affiliations less influenced by age, gender, ethnicity, and language barriers (Gee, 2004). Grounded in a strong affiliation and contribution culture, people are willing to participate in different ways to build a very active and collaborative space. I believe that educators in English-as-a-

Second Language could draw attention to these attributes and encourage students to be part of curriculum development, making their classroom an interest-driven space. What if teachers develop a class curriculum with English language learners (ELLs) rather than implement a mandated standard curriculum for ELLs? The standard curriculum does not consider what the learners want to learn. The curriculum is typically developed by knowledge experts who decide what ELLs should know (Belcher, 2004; 2006). If teachers invite students to design their curriculum, students can bring their own interests and learn in a similar way to users in MTS. Teachers can let their ELLs become technical supporters, idea bankers, testers, and motivational supporters in developing their class curriculum depending on their skills and interests. Students will bring different levels of expertise in the design process based on their own learning. Through participation in a collaborative curriculum design process, students would develop ownership of their learning (Bruner, 1996) and move beyond the role of passive knowledge consumers, which is what mandated curriculum fosters (Illich, 1971).

Collaborative design practices between a teacher and students would also facilitate the development of collective instruction to lower the distinction between knowledge experts and novices. Teachers can invite students to participate in the instruction from the outset and to participate in follow up discussions. Teachers can present themselves as one of the members in this collaborative learning place where teachers and students design together. They can invite students into instructions to create the circumstance that “we”—teachers and students—work together to accomplish certain tasks rather than the

monolithic style of instruction that flows from a teacher (expert) to students (novice). Teachers can position themselves as advanced members in this collaborative learning space with students who share the same affiliation. In addition, teachers can expand their instruction in out-of-school settings. They can create blogs, Wikis, Facebook pages, tweets, or even texting through their cell phones to expand their discussions about instructions. Teachers do not need to be the only instructor. They can invite parents, other teachers, and other students, anybody who wants to join the discussions about their instruction all over the world. In this way, students can access and expand instruction anytime, anywhere, and learn from their teachers, other teachers and students, even someone who they will never meet and know. If this public invitation will be an issue, teachers and students can manage it together. Together, they can decide who can join collaborative instruction and only send invitations to those they can trust. In this case, at least teachers and students can have a safe environment but still have multiple instructors.

Another practical suggestion for ELLs at a personal level is joining certain kinds of affinity space to communicate in English what they like to do and know (Black, 2008; Lam, 2004). They can meet people all over the world and can share their interests and communicate with them in English. They can have 24/7 English instructors from anywhere to improve their English ability and to develop other skills related to their interests. Improvement of English proficiency with enjoyment of learning will help to transfer English proficiency into school learning.

Drawing on the experiences of users in MTS, educators in second and English language learning can gain a reconceptualized understanding of design curriculum, instruction, and the role of instructors. The classroom could be a place similar to an affinity space in which students build an affiliation among teachers and other students to collectively design and develop curriculum and instruction. Students will have more meaningful opportunities and experiences by interacting with peers, their teachers, parents, other teachers, and any others who bring their interests and expertise into the collaborative learning place.

### **Theoretical Implication**

My study indicates that Halliday's (1989) SFG can be a useful analytic framework to understand language practices in online affinity spaces. Systemic functional grammar highlights the role of certain contexts in linguistic choices and the process of meaning making through negotiation among language users. Through these choices, the language system is maintained and modified over time (Hayes & Lee, 2012; Schleppegrell, 2012). By using this theory as an analytic tool, I showed that online contexts can revitalize the elements of primary orality that occur in oral culture through textual communicational modes. Even though users in MTS interact with texts and visuals, they are less affected by physical distance and time differences that typically create disparity between instructors and learners in the context of learning through traditional instructional texts. This online affinity space stimulates elements of oral culture to enhance immediate, interactive, and personal connections among instructors, learners, and other users

in MTS. Authors of tutorials adopt these environmental influences into their written instructions and expand their instructions as collaborative learning practices. The SFG framework provides a clear, analytic rubric to define language practices in MTS and to make sense of language as a social, semiotic system.

My analysis of user participation in Chapter 4 revealed Gee's (2004) concept of affinity spaces can be used as an analytic tool to understand the design process of the space, however, it needs to expand the notion of sharing leadership. Gee emphasized the role of leaders in affinity spaces as resources rather than bosses. Founded in a high regard for knowledge contribution, people share their expertise and guide novices to become experts. However, people in affinity spaces not only share knowledge or expertise, but they also share their power, leadership, responsibilities, and roles. Thus, this space is created and sustained together, making the design process a collaborative effort. This model of sharing leadership and responsibilities demonstrates a different way of distributing power among leaders and follower, designers and users, experts and novices in order to promote different levels of user participation in design process. I believe that Gee's (2004) notion of leaders as resources is still the foundation of affinity spaces in general. However, we need to expand the notion of leadership, to sharing leadership and power to strengthen our understanding of online affinity spaces.

Another theoretical implication pertains to the analysis of Nicole's (Chapter 2) intentions and interactions with other MTS users. The primary

element defining affinity spaces is sharing “common endeavors” (Gee, 2004, p.85), which indicates people in these spaces pursue common goals and help each other to accomplish their goals through collaborative efforts. Gee and Hayes (2010) described the importance of pursuing and keeping the specific goals, endeavors, and interests in affinity spaces in order to keep members actively participating. They argue that when online affinity spaces emphasize socialization over primary components such as common endeavors, that participants might leave because the nature of the site changes from technical to social. Thus, people have assumed that socialization plays a secondary role in affinity spaces. However, Nicole’s case has shown that the importance of socializing to sustain her practices moving from socializing to technical learning in MTS. For Nicole, socialization was the main purpose of participating in MTS at the early period. Further, it was her strong relationships that allowed her to continue taking her English practice to more advanced levels. Certainly, the advancement of her language skills was tied to her ability to simultaneously socialize and collaborate on ad hoc teams to solve technical problems. In this context, socializing may have actually been a key to her success as it facilitated all else. This case indicates that we need to recognize that the common interest is not the only attraction for promoting affiliation and there can be multiple attractions in-between socializing and pursuing common interests rather than dichotomizing understanding.

## Reflection

In this section, I share the challenges that I faced as an international scholar whose first language is not English, and how those challenges affected my virtual ethnographic research in an English online site. I discuss the challenges of collecting data, and reflect on how much I have learned and grown as an educator and researcher.

The main goal of ethnographic research is to make an unfamiliar culture accessible for researchers and readers (Greertz, 1973; Tobin, 2005).

Traditionally, researchers physically relocated to the new place to explore unfamiliar cultural spaces by interacting and living with people in other places. Since virtual ethnography moves the physicality of cultural places into online spaces, people have developed new cultures and ways of interacting through textual platforms. I acknowledge the multimodal nature of communication in online spaces; however, the primary communicational mode is text. This situation loses non-verbal communication cues such as gestures and shared signals that can provide rich contextualized understanding for researchers.

Because English is my second language, I often question myself about the reliability of my understanding and interpretation of texts. When conducting traditional ethnographic research through observing people, there are more clues to understanding certain situations and interactions that are co-presented, which can fill the gap created by language barriers. I also acknowledge the difficulties of capturing and interpreting all these cues. After all, I can capture interactions by recording them in my mind through memories, which allow me to easily reflect



back on the moments. This is in contrast to co-presenting, in which the interactions and events have already occurred. In this case, I highly rely on the interpretation of texts to understand interactions and events, which allows me to uncover the culture in MTS. As a result of conducting this four-year ethnographic study, I developed considerable confidence about the culture of MTS. However, it took a longer time for me to build confidence related to comprehending events and interactions in certain cultural contexts without the richness of so many communicational clues.

Another challenge conducting virtual ethnography is collecting and managing data. Many of my doctoral colleagues envy my situation of conducting online research and the associated method of collecting data. They assumed that I can access data anytime and do not need to worry about losing data. Realistically, however, online data can disappear without notification. For example, I frequently would not be able to access data that I saw last year or just last month. Until January, 2011, MTS allowed access of up to 3,000 posts for each user. Until then, I could see all Nicole's (Chapter 2) posts from the first to the last. Thus, I did not worry about urgently downloading all her posts into my laptop because I could access all her posts at that time. When I narrowed down my research focus on her language practices in summer 2011, I searched all her posts to see her trajectories of language practices. However, I could only search 500 posts because MTS changed the policy due to the lack of server capacity to curate all posts in perpetuity. The oldest post I could find was written on January 14, 2009. After I learned this, I collected all of her accessible posts and creations in

MTS by using the function of “find all post by” in her personal profile. Also, I used another search function in MTS to find Nicole’s posts in each forum. This allowed me to find more posts than what the search function “find all post by” provided. However, it was time consuming.

The more important aspect is that I lost key data. I recall that Nicole’s early posts had crucial grammatical errors that could have easily demonstrated her level of English proficiency at the time. However, I could not re-access these early posts to prove my points. Thus, I needed to come up with other ways to make this point. This accessibility issue is crucial in online research. Even though many affinity spaces are open to the public, it does not mean there is open access to the server to retrieve raw data for researchers. It is essential for researchers to develop programs or services that can download online data easily as raw data. This would avoid the need to copy and paste text into Microsoft® Word, save as PDF files, or take screenshots.

In addition, managing data is a challenge for conducting online research. Currently, I save data in various ways using Microsoft® Word software, Adobe Acrobat, and Snagit®. I managed data under file folders categorized by participants, MTS forums, and chapters in the dissertation. Even though I came up with my own systematic ways of managing data, it takes time to search certain data. I tried to use NVivo, which is software for qualitative research. However, I faced the challenge of learning all the functions that NVivo provides to help manage and analyze data by myself. That was actually delaying my analyses, and thus, I adhered to more familiar formats to complete the dissertation. In the

future, I will definitely use qualitative research software in order to manage data more effectively.

### **Future Research Suggestions**

In this section, I present collective ideas for next steps in expanding the results of my study. I suggest recommendations for further understanding affinity spaces related to my study, and then I connect all this to learning practices outside of school settings and the formal educational context. Additional questions that should be asked include:

1. What are the grass-root design practices in other online affinity spaces that represent how these spaces share their leadership and power to promote high user participation?
2. What are the patterns of user participation in other online affinity spaces?
3. How do other online affinity spaces promote members' learning in both technical and language aspects and how can they use language in their unique instructional contexts?

Additional questions that directly relate to not only English language learning but also all school learning include:

4. How can we develop curriculum and instruction as a collaborative work between teachers, students, and other people at school settings?

5. How can we expand classroom instruction to bring other resources and people into classroom learning to make a classroom where we can have more teachers than students?
6. How can we transform school environments to ones more like affinity spaces to better prepare our students for 21st century?

I focused on understanding the nature of MTS, an affinity space, thus my study is limited to generalizing what I learned about the affinity space to other affinity spaces. Although, my study contributes a better understanding about some practices in affinity spaces, I believe that there should be much more research about other practices in affinity spaces. Furthermore, I want to make the connection between learning practices in online spaces and in-school settings in order to enrich and enhance school learning. I, as an educator who is especially focused on English language learning, see opportunities that can be applied to develop collaborative and cooperative language learning instruction as well as authentic and situated language learning contexts. I acknowledge barriers such as access to technology and language policies that affect the implementation of my recommendation in certain school settings. However, I am confident that there will be classroom teachers who want to bring these different learning opportunities to English language learners to prepare them to be ready for 21st century. This work presents the benefits of adopting technology and connecting informal and formal learning practices in language education as well as the challenges of bridging two different worlds—online and school—together.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF SOCIAL GROUPS

: I used the exact descriptions from each social group in MTS, even including emoticons.

1. The Writers Guild: A group for people who like to write
2. College Students: A group for those of us of college age!
3. Foundational Building: A group to share foundations for building inspiration.
4. Photoshop Maniacs: Just a group for all who use photoshop.
5. deviantART users: A group for all the dA users around MTS (:
6. Photography Lovers: For all the simmers around here who love photography, being it watching it, taking it, editing it or everything ^^
7. Fruits Basket!: Whether it's the anime or the manga, let's talk about our darling Faruba!
8. Agnostic Simmers: Hey fellow agnostics!! =)
9. Makeup Creators: Adding a little makeup can make the difference between a plain Jane sim and a supermodel. Join if you love making makeup!
10. Art: For people who like art (whether it's art class or not) or are artists themselves
11. Magical group of Mystic Wonders: Do you believe in magic?like magical creatures & places?enjoy fantasy stories and legends?if you like them,than this group is for you
12. Anime!!: Do you like the anime/manga?? So come here and talk about it!!
13. Harry Potter Lovers: For anyone who has read the Harry Potter series or seen the movies and fallen in love
14. Eye Creators: For all you simmers out there that love to create eyes. Discuss tips and tricks here!



15. LIVE FOR ROCK MUSIC!: Talk about your favourite song, comment your favourite music and recommend your favourite band!
16. Youtube peoples: This is the group for youtube user's come join!
17. An End to Hate: The purpose of this group is to end descrimination against all people, be they gay, black, Jewish, or otherwise. We aim to end hate and promote acceptance.
18. Lovers of Johnny Depp: If you love Johnny Depp in all of his awesomeness, join!
19. Killer Fanclub: its a band not killing stuff
20. Unpopular People: This is a group for unpopular People, and for meet other people, I hope...
21. Muse: Do you love the English Rock band Muse?
22. Evil Simmers: A group for all evil people :P
23. HIM (the group): This is a group for all the simmers that like HIM :)
24. Linkin Park:For fans of the band Linkin Park!! ^.^
25. Architecture: A group for all simmers that love architecture and put their ideas into virtual reality in the Sims.
25. Go Green!: Concerned about our planet? This is the group for you. :)
26. Arts: For all that enjoy arts and want to share and talk about it.
27. Tim Burton's films: A group for all the simmers that like Tim Burton's films ;)
28. The Teen Club: A place for us teenage MTS users to hang and talk.
29. The Simpsons: Do you like the Simpsons?? Come and Join now then!!!

30. Hispanic/Latin Simmers: A group for all those spanish-speakers simadicts :)
31. DEATH NOTE:A group for all the people that like Death Note
32. Anime, and games:A group to discuss Japanese Anime, and video games
33. Writers: A group for writers of all sorts
34. Students: A place for the school-bound to vent and chat and so on
35. House MD: For everyone who likes the House MD TV series =D
36. Meshers United: A group for people interested in 3D modeling of anything (not necessarily Sims 2) to learn about, get feedback on, give feedback on, and enjoy looking at pretty meshes. =D
37. Formula one fans (Random and... starng chat): Do you love F1, do you want to talk about it, well come and join then.
38. Fashion Queen: If you like or have sims that dress in alternative fashion, chat about it here
39. HEROES lovers: For all that people who love the Heroes TV series...
40. Twilight Fans(Sims): For all Twilight Fans!
41. The Joker's Gang: Here is a place where the joker can be obsessed over!
42. Goth simmers: Hi! This group is for all simmers that love GOTH things... Do you like all that is gothic? If your answer is YES... this is your group!!!!
43. Lot Creators: This group is for any expert and beginner lot builders out there!
44. Nintendorks: A group for all Nintendo fans of any series. :) Nintendorks welcomes people with all the friendliness of an over-affectionate squid with many cheerfully grasping tentacles!
45. Vampire: For anyone that likes vampires, plays with vampires [Simmys or not ;)], or just plain loves VAMPYS

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol

I appreciate your time in providing responses to the following questions. Please type your responses below each question, and use as much space as you need. Thank you!

### **Start of Your *Sims* Activities**

When did you first start playing *The Sims*? What prompted you to start playing?

When did you first starting visiting fan sites? What sites did you visit, and prompted you to look at them?

When did you start [choose as appropriate: making content, creating stories, writing scripts, other] and what got you started?

What were the first kinds of things you created?

### **Your Current *Sims* Activities**

How much time do you typically spend per week on:

-Playing *The Sims*

-Creating content [or writing stories, etc.]

-Participating in *Sims* fansites (reviewing other people's creations, posting and responding to comments, etc.)

What has motivated you to participate in these activities over time?

When do you fit your *Sims* activities into your schedule?

### **Learning to Create *Sims* Content**

What have been the most valuable resources in helping you learn to create content/write stories/other?

What software tools do you use?

What have you learned most recently?

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

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

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

[prompt: Have you used what you've learned in school? Has anything you've learned in school been helpful in your *Sims* content creation?]

### **Some General Questions about You**

How old are you?

How would you describe where you live: urban, rural, or suburban?

[for youth still in school]

What grade or year are you in school?

[for adults]

What is your current or former occupation?

What is your educational background?

### **FOR FOLLOW UP INTERVIEWS**

I appreciate your time in providing responses to the following questions. Please type your responses below each question, and use as much space as you need. Your responses will help us clarify some of the activities you mentioned in your responses to our first set of questions. Thank you!

#### ***The Sims* fan communities**

1. When did you first discover the     (insert website name here)     fan community? What made you want to be a part of this community?

2. How did you figure out how to participate in \_\_(insert website name here)\_\_\_? Did you read their rules? Did you spend time reading what others had posted?
3. What parts of the site do you visit most frequently? Has your use of the site changed over time? How?
4. (If staff member) How did you become a staff member for the site? What is your role?

### **Interaction with other *Sims* fans**

1. What forms of communication do you use with other people on *The Sims* fan sites (such as writing in guestbooks, posting in forums, blogging, participating in chat events, email)?
2. How do you communicate with other *Sims* fans beyond the fan site (if at all)?
3. How often do you give others help and advice on content creation/story writing/other? Can you provide a recent example?

### **Learning**

1. If you use online tutorials, what makes a tutorial particularly helpful or useful for you?
2. Could you name (and provide links to) one or two of the tutorials that you've found most helpful?
3. Is there any one approach that you find yourself doing first when you try to learn new content creation/want to learn how to do something for writing stories/other?
4. Was there anything that you tried to learn related to Sims content creation/story writing/other, and weren't able to do?
5. Can you tell us about any kind of content creation/story production technique/other that you haven't even considering pursuing? Why haven't you chosen to pursue this?
6. Is there anything that you would like to learn to create, but haven't yet? What might you need before your pursue this?

### **Computing Skills**

1. How would you rate your own computer skills in relation to other people you know? Please mark your self-rating on the following scale:

1	2	3	4	5
Basic	Average	Intermediate	Advanced	Superior

Your Computer Skills

2. How confident do you feel about your ability to learn new computer-related skills?

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

**We have just a couple of other questions.**

1. What do others in your life think of your *Sims* activities?

2. To what extent do you consider yourself a “gamer”? Do others consider you to be a gamer? Why?

## APPENDIX C

### THE INSTALLATION INSTRUCTIONS OF THE PROGRAM



### ⇒ **Basic Download and Install Instructions:**

1. **Download:** Click the download link to save the .rar or .zip file(s) to your computer.
2. **Extract:** Use [WinRAR](#) (Windows) or [Stuffit](#) (Mac) to extract the .package file(s) from the .rar or .zip file(s).
3. **Place in Downloads Folder:** Cut and paste the .package file(s) into your Downloads folder:
  - Windows XP: Documents and Settings\<(Current User Account)\My Documents\EA Games\The Sims 2\Downloads\
  - Windows Vista: Users\<(Current User Account)\Documents\EA Games\The Sims 2\Downloads\
  - Mac: Users\<(Current User Account)\Documents\EA Games\The Sims 2\Downloads\

### ⇒ **Need more information?**

- **For a full, complete guide to downloading complete with pictures and more information, see: [Game Help: Downloading for Fracking Idiots](#).**
- Custom content not showing up in the game? See: [Game Help: Getting Custom Content to Show Up](#).
- Anyone can use both .rar and .zip files easily! On Windows, use [WinRAR](#). On Mac, use [Stuffit](#).
- If you don't have a Downloads folder, just make one. See instructions at: [Game Help: No Downloads Folder](#).

APPENDIX D

SCREENSHOT OF DESCRIPTION OF UNIQUE IN SIMS

The title under you name is based on many things, how long you've been a member, picked items, featured items, whether you donate to the site or not. You don't get to change it unless you have a special privilege - such as being a moderator.

*With your rejected items (get prepared for detailed constructive criticism):* First, MTS2 has a hell of a lot of eyes. And now they only upload ones which are incredibly well made or very unique (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) for examples.) . Your most likely problem there is that there are already a lot of 'cat' eyes made by people. Hence the site does not need more of them and weeds out as many as they can. If you want them to be uploaded I would try adding shadows and black around the edges to create more depth, also I'd make some more recolors and center the iris because it looks like it's placed a little bit to the left. 😊 I'm thinking of writing an eye painting by hand tutorial for photoshop sometime soon... 🙄

Now, with the lipstick, the main reason for rejection I see there is that the colors have too much contrast (or light to dark ratio), you can see that in the left corner of the lips - there is a shadow that doesn't appear on the right side. But that can be easily fixed in photoshop. 😊 Also with the lips, while we want the colors to be dark and bold because it's gothic, they are a bit too 'blocky'. Meaning that the alpha (or the black and white file in bodyshop after you export it and open it in adobe photoshop) is wrong. What the vast majority of custom lipstick has now is a slightly transparent alpha around the outer edges of the lips so that it can blend with any skin tone. 😊 Take a look at [Bruno's set here](#), see how the lipstick doesn't cover the whole lips and fades towards the edges? That's because of the transparent alpha. And [take a look at this](#) because the picture shows how it blends with every skintone. And don't forget that lips have natural lines and creases so you can paint them in for added affect. You can see some good use of that [here](#) and [here](#). Finally, lips are more likely to be uploaded if it is something original that no one has seen before. Just look [here](#) and at our very own zj's work [here](#). So just play around with your lipstick set a bit and keep those points in mind - color, contrast, alpha and originality and it will be uploaded in no time. 🙄

Personally, I think the hair is fine and that you did a great job on it, I want it. 🙄 But MTS2 is much pickier than me so I'll tell you what you can change to get it uploaded. The only issue is that you have made the stripes go in completely vertical lines, and while that would look awesome, it's not physically possible. 🙄 See how the hair has waves in it? You should make the stripes follow those waves, just look at dyed hair in real life. Or you can take a look [here](#) or [here](#) . In fact, look at all of nymphy's hairs. She does an excellent job on recolors. 😊 And if you have nothing else to do you can always add more texture to the hair or re-texture it to make it your own design.

And finally, with your sim; what MTS2 means when they say it looks general is that it looks like a maxis template face. MTS2 is pretty damn exclusive about what sims they accept, especially adult female sims, if really any part of your sims face looks like maxis made it they won't upload it. If you want her uploaded she will need a face lift. 😊 I would have read of [this](#). Here's a quote by HP regarding sim uploading

Quote:

Raised Standards for "Sims - Other": Our New Standards: In light of the fact that the "Sims - Other" category has more sims than any other category of sims on this site, and the fact that anyone is capable of making a pretty sim, we have no choice but to hold uploaders to extremely high standards for this category. About Pretty Sims: With over 2000 "Other" sims already uploaded to MTS2, we already have every possible combination of sliders for pretty model sims. We do not need any more basic pretty model sims unless they are extremely unique. We would rather have sims that look more like real people, less than perfect and gorgeous, than yet another pretty sim! Unique Faces: Your sim must not only represent a genuine effort to create a unique and different face sculpt, but must be truly interesting and compelling... something that is unlike sims that have been seen before, and gives downloaders a reason to choose yours over the 2000+ random sims we already have. Getting Accepted: Do not be surprised if your sim uploaded here gets rejected for a bland face sculpt! Effective immediately, it will be rare for sims submitted to this section to be accepted! You are HIGHLY encouraged to use our Creator Feedback forum to improve your sim before uploading, as that will help you create a more unique face sculpt. However, using Creator Feedback is no guarantee that your sim will be accepted. Please don't be offended or insulted if your sim gets rejected - you are not alone! Even moderators get rejected sometimes! Go back to Body Shop and play with their face some more. Post in Creator Feedback with pictures. Improve your sims and work on creating something truly unique.

So yeah, don't expect your sims to be accepted unless they are UNIQUE as all hell. For examples, see [here](#) and all of zj's models, in particular, this [one](#). 😊

Ok, sorry. I know that rant was incredibly long and harsh and way too detailed, but I hope it helps you understand lots of things about MTS2 upload requirements and takes away all that confusion. And hey, you're still new. Your work can only get better from here and I expect some great creations from you in the future. 🙄

x a m y x

APPENDIX E

DETAILED DESCRIPTIONS OF STAFF ROLES

# Who are the mods? How do I become a mod?

Like 2 people like this. Be the first of your friends.

Replies: 0 (Who?), Viewed: 26105 times.

Show Printable Version Email this Page Subscribe to this Thread Search this Thread Rating: ★★★★★

31st Aug 2009, 09:45 AM Who are the mods? How do I become a mod? # 1



administrator  
Join Date: Jul 2005  
Posts: 10,692  
Thanks: 17811 in 56 Posts  
24 Achievements  
View My Journal

## Who/what are the staff?

The MTS staff team, made up of the moderators and the admins, are responsible for keeping MTS running - that entails keeping an eye on threads, answering questions, moderating uploads, dealing with rule breakers; as well as bigger tasks like writing FAQs and modding updates, discussing and eventually implementing new features, systems, forums and so on.

All staff members are volunteers, working on the site in their spare time; and we have quite a small team - generally around twenty or so staff members at any one time.

For a list of all current staff members, [click here](#) (but bear in mind that, if you need to contact a staff member, picking a random name off that list and PMing them will probably not get you the person you need). Staff members can be identified by their pretty coloured names, and an icon beneath their avatar, as detailed below...

## What do the different colours mean, or what flavours of staff are there?

### moderator

Staff with **light green** names are moderators. Moderators generally have duties, and therefore powers, in one or two specific areas of the site - perhaps the help section, or the community boards; or a particular part of the Downloads area. Moderators generally look after the everyday runnings of their particular section - answering questions, nudging threads back on topic, moderating uploads etc; although all staff participate in general staff discussions about the site as a whole.

### senior moderator

Staff with **dark green** names are Senior Moderators. Senior Moderators have the same powers as normal Moderators; but are considered to be among the most experienced and generally awesome of the moderators.

### super moderator

Staff with **purple** names are Super Moderators. Supermods have moderator powers everywhere on the site - that is, they can move, delete, and lock threads etc in any section of MTS. Supermods can also deal with users anywhere on the site - so if you're having troubles with a user in more than one thread/area, a supermod or an admin is a good person to talk to. Similarly, supermods can generally answer questions about the site in general - although it's usually better to post these in [Site Issues](#).

### administrator

Staff with **red** names are Administrators. Administrators can do pretty much anything in technical terms; and are, again, capable of answering questions or complaints about the site, and of dealing with users who need a smack upside the head.

### site owner

Staff called Delphy are the Owner. They are a very rare breed; sightings are few and far between as they are usually well hidden behind curtains of code and acronyms. Delphies are the sole staff members responsible for coding all the gubbins on the site, and for looking after the servers.

## What about Site Helpers?

Site Helpers are not staff members. Helpers are users who have agreed to dedicate time to helping out around the site - perhaps by updating and tidying the wiki, or by providing constructive feedback in the Creator Feedback Forum, or by greeting new members in the Introductions forum. They are not, however, moderators; they don't participate in staff discussions, and they do not have any mod powers (like locking threads).

## APPENDIX F

### TABLE LISTING OF REQUIRED MATERIALS IN EACH TUTORIAL

Title of tutorial	Programs Needed
Transparent Clothing meshes	<p>What you'll need: CTU, SimGeomEditor from Delphy's Small Tools collection (<a href="http://www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=372169">http://www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=372169</a>), s3pe, the graphics editor of your choice, MorphMaker. If you chop up a mesh, you may find the beta of MorphMatcher useful: <a href="http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=442393">http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=442393</a>. If you do a complete job including lod 3, you'll need to know the BloomsBase method of adding a mesh to a CAS part using s3pe: <a href="http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=445332">http://www.modthesims.info/showthread.php?t=445332</a>.</p>
Converting an Image for Tattoos Using Tattooinator Convert	<p>Tools: I'm going to be using GIMP for image editing, but it's the same process if you're using Photoshop or anything else that can make .dds files.</p>
Converting Skirts For Dudes	<p>Programs Needed</p> <p>Milkshape - with Wes's tools - Cat's UV data merge tool  CTU  Morph Maker  Morph Match Maker  Photoshop - with DDS plugins - Nvidia plugins(only if you want a custom normal) S3PE Finding the Meshes</p>

Clothing Meshing  
for Dummies

Tools you'll need:

CTU - runs on Windows, Mac, and Linux. Requires .NET Framework 2.0 (included in 3.5 for Windows 7 users) and DirectX Runtime - if it won't run, you probably don't have one or both of those correctly installed. (I also found it wouldn't work in a Program Files folder, probably because of Windows 7 file protections.)

Milkshape 3D - 30-day trial, after which you pay \$35 USD or 25 EUR which includes all future upgrades. If you're serious about meshing for Sims3 or a host of other games, it's well worth the price. Windows on  
Q-mesh plugins for Milkshape, by Wes Howe. You need these to import and export meshes to/from Milkshape, and for some other meshing tools.

MorphMaker - Windows only.

Postal - Java-based, runs on Windows and Mac  
and/or

s3pe - Windows, and Mac/Linux with limitations.

You'll also need a way to extract .rar files to install the above. Personally I use 7-zip.

How to Do  
Lipstick for  
Sims3!

What you need:

CAS Texture+Unitool

[www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=364926](http://www.modthesims.info/download.php?t=364926)

For this tutorial I use Photoshop and my Photoshop is in portuguese but if you need something to be translate just tell me.

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APPENDIX G

INSTRUCTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL FORM



Office of Research Integrity and Assurance

**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.