3

Status

Developing Social and Cultural Capital

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Introduction

Lauren Chicoine\(^1\) discovered her love for anime in college, but only upon entering an online anime music video (AMV) community did she find a passion for creating her own digital movies (see the case study at the end of this chapter for more on AMV creation). “I had once seen an awesome *Final Fantasy 8* AMV and was fascinated by it,” she explained. She “became obsessed” when she stumbled on the online community. “I was just like . . . oh my God! I, too, can realize my creative vision!” For Lauren, her excitement was intimately connected to social aspects of making. She wanted “to tell a story, to share something that’s in my head with other people.” Lauren had to learn how to use Adobe Premier and After Effects as part of the AMV creation process, a challenging learning experience that, in her words, “kicked me in the butt.” Lauren decided to give back to the community by sharing some of the skills she had learned as a graphic designer. She created tutorials for various techniques and tools in Photoshop, in areas that she saw other AMV editors struggling with. Over time, Lauren became recognized in the community for her sophisticated use of design elements and techniques in her videos, as well as her helpful tutorials. Other editors would contact her personally for advice and feedback, and she was even featured in an interview series published on the AMV site because of some of these unique techniques she employed.

Lauren’s process of “leveling up” in the AMV online community illustrates how learning and achievement are tied to relationships and status cultivated in an online affinity network. In the previous chapter we described the glue—shared interests, affinities, purposes, and practices—that holds online affinity groups together. This chapter focuses on the
chisel—how networks delineate membership, status, and achievement, and how young people navigate these social and cultural distinctions. While all the online affinity networks we studied are openly networked and have low barriers to entry, they also have ways of marking boundaries, status, and hierarchy. In order to be both open and maintain high standards, they must enforce community norms, reward individual contributions, and mark quality work. As youth become more embedded in the online affinity networks we studied, they gain skill and cultural know-how, and they build new relationships centered on learning and co-mentorship in their area of interest. Unlike social networks that young people navigate in their schools, families, and local peer groups, the relationships formed in online affinity networks are more tuned to a particular identity, interest, or purpose. When focused on expertise and cultural production, these specialized networks and relationships fuel learning by providing knowledge, support, and feedback. The relationships and learning in online affinity networks are powerful but also compartmentalized in ways that are both liberating and limiting because of disconnection from relationships and organizations in young people’s local communities. After first framing how we conceptualize the unique forms of cultural capital that young people gain through online affinity networks, we delve into the details of how community norms, reputation, and status are negotiated and the implications for learning.

Subcultural Capital and Learning in Online Affinity Networks

Online affinity networks confer unique benefits—membership and status within a specialized network as well as access to learning-relevant assets such as coveted information, helpful feedback, and visibility. We draw on long-standing educational research that has investigated how cultural and social capital—understood as valuable cultural status and social connections—relates to learning and opportunity (Bourdieu 1986; J. Coleman 1988; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau 2003). Unlike most strands of work in this area, however, our focus is not on the cultural and social capital that accrues in dominant organizations such as schools, civic institutions, and workplaces. Instead, our focus is more aligned with what Sarah Thornton (1996) has described as “subcultural capital” within the underground music scene.
Research on youth subcultures argues that they emerge, in part, through an act of resistance to mainstream society (Brake 2003; Hebdige 1979; Wilkins 2008). Further, youth subcultures are not monolithic; they shape, and are shaped by, the contexts in which youth interact with others (McRobbie 1994). The networks we studied share many of these characteristics, but they lack the active opposition to mainstream or middle-class culture of the prototypical subcultural frame. Instead, they are more akin to what Stephen Duncombe (2008) described in his study of DIY zine publishers, a nerdy “alternative culture” that is more “subterranean” or “underground” than oppositional. In describing otaku culture in the United States, Lawrence Eng suggests that “their resistance is oblique, based on appropriation rather than rejection of media and other technology that they fundamentally enjoy” (Eng 2012:100). While many online affinity networks do have more oppositional qualities, our cases also tended toward these more nerdy and less oppositional cultural valences. Fandoms and online affinity networks point to the unbundling of some of the associations ascribed to subcultures; we use the term “subcultural capital” with the caveat that our groups do not conform to the classic oppositional frame associated with the term.

Where our cases found common cause with the longer history of youth subculture studies is in their distinctive forms of insider knowledge and status markers that distinguish them from mainstream culture and dominant social networks. Participants typically reflect that they do not have local networks through which to pursue the interests that are celebrated in these online affinity networks. We also found that the online affinity networks we examined require that new members acquire subcultural capital to fully participate. As youth discover and join online affinity networks to pursue their interests in video games, boybands, wrestling, or knitting, they interface with etiquette, social norms, and rituals that are initially quite foreign to them. Learning-centered online affinity networks have processes for welcoming newcomers and educating them in community-specific know-how, ways for people to seek and give feedback, and status systems that reward experienced members for their demonstrations of skill.

Examining the relationship between subcultural capital and connected learning calls attention to how learning and achievement are supported by specific forms of cultural identity, relationships, and so-
cial networks. By using the language of cultural and social capital, we do not imply that value accrues in a universal and linear way as young people build their social networks and cultural competence. Instead, we see what counts as culturally and socially valuable as under constant negotiation and contention, and it can be challenging to convert value between different subcultures or in ways recognized by mainstream institutions. High status in a science-fiction fandom does not necessarily translate to status among athletes or school-based achievement. Young people are being socialized into new systems of social and cultural value as they enter new online affinity networks, and they can struggle to make these values and relationships intelligible to parents, teachers, and peers in their local communities. Our earlier Digital Youth Project research reported on how young people “segmented” their identities, creating separate online identities for nerdy affinity networks that were firewalled from their school-based identities displayed on Facebook or MySpace accounts (Ito et al. 2010). As more young people report making new friendships online (Lenhart et al. 2015), we expect that these experiences of navigating varied regimes of social, cultural, and subcultural capital will become increasingly commonplace.

The subcultural capital cultivated by online affinity networks has qualities associated with “bonding social capital”—relationships that develop among groups of people who share similar interests or circumstances—which is associated with high levels of social cohesion, shared norms, trust, information sharing, help, and support (Portes and Landolt 1996; Woolcock 1998). A classic example of bonding capital appears in Putnam’s (2001) discussion of American bowling leagues, where he finds that participation is associated with greater group solidarity, support, and even safe spaces for participants to reflect on society and civic affairs. While scant work examines the relationship between bonding social capital and young people’s education, some learning scientists suggest that bonded relationships among members of a learning community may lead to greater information sharing, trust, and support among students (Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla 2003). We find, too, that bonded relationships are critical to youth participants in online affinity networks for leveling up as learners.

In an extension of the concept of bonding social capital, Mario Small (2009) examined the development of bonding social capital as well as its
benefits in a study of day-care centers in New York City. Unlike the layered and multifaceted relationships that Putnam identified in bowling clubs or church groups, the relationships fostered in day-care centers that Small describes are bonded and supportive relationships largely contained within the specific sphere of child rearing. He refers to these organization-driven types of connections as “compartmental intimates.” For example, Small shows how parents help one another, for example, by babysitting each other’s children, gifting baby clothes, or sharing tips about treating childhood illnesses. These relationships did not exist separately from the parents’ overlapping participation at the child-care center, and thus they provided a compartmentalized yet quite intimate type of relationship with key benefits. We find that the social capital that youth develop in online affinity networks is similarly specialized and compartmentalized. Although different from the parents in Small’s study who come together for the mutual need for child care, the social networks in youth online affinity networks share this close but compartmentalized quality.

The everyday activities of online affinity networks, including forum discussions, contests, and member-organized classes, provide a setting where youth can develop strong bonds with peers who help them and cheer them on as they level up. They contrast with the status systems of freaks, geeks, and cool kids, jocks, and burnouts, situated in schools where youth are not likely to be voluntary participants (Eckert 1989; Milner 2013). As we saw in the previous chapter, youth find and participate in online affinity networks voluntarily because they are seeking a network of peers with shared interests and affinities. Many of our respondents explain that they enjoy participating in their online affinity network because they are recognized for work activities related to their interests that are not seen as valuable at school. This does not mean, however, that online affinity networks are devoid of hierarchy and exclusions. Ito (2012a) finds that AMV or video remix fans develop their own norms, status hierarchies, and boundary-making processes around a noncommercial, amateur ethos aimed at inclusivity while also cultivating an insider subcultural identity. Similarly, Schor et al. (2015) find that seemingly open-access peer-to-peer sharing communities can require rarified forms of cultural capital for full participation. Somewhat ironically, these informal social and cultural ways of marking status take
on more salience in openly networked systems that lack formal organizational roles and hierarchies.

These themes are similar to norm formation in other online settings, such as usenet forums or chats, for which researchers have described barriers to entry for newcomers (Burnett and Bonnici 2003; Cherny 1999). We have sought out networks that do not have overtly exclusionary values. For example, while still male dominated, the gaming networks we studied show little evidence of the overt sexism that characterizes #gamergate. Still, the insider knowledge, cultural referents, and technical knowledge of these groups make them less welcoming to those not immersed in male-dominated gaming culture. The specialization and bonding of online affinity networks necessarily creates distinctions between insiders and outsiders.

The remainder of this chapter describes the dynamics of how the online affinity networks we studied enforce norms, encourage mentorship, and mark status, and then it explores implications for learning. In line with the overall aim of our book to surface the potential for online affinity networks to support connected learning, we focus on how groups maintain standards, and how active participants work to meet them. How do new members develop the subcultural capital needed to navigate these systems of achievement? How do participants learn community norms for talk and interactions with others, and what is considered transgressive and counterproductive to the social order? And if participants learn from others, how do they find those mentors—and where do those teachers come from? After first describing the ways in which the online affinity networks we studied enforce and support community norms and standards, the chapter describes the learning-relevant benefits of participation—mentorship, feedback, and specialized knowledge.

Status Systems

In all of our case studies, various forms of status systems operate within their respective learning environments. Much like prior work on youth subcultures, we find that each community arranges membership across key status classifications (Ito 2012a; Thornton 1996). In what follows, we discuss these systems in three parts: status recognition processes tied to
affinity network participation, elites as status exemplars, and the roles of mentors and peers in teaching and conferring subcultural capital.

Learning and Earning Subcultural Capital

In this section we highlight the entry points for new participants to show how each community maintains its own distinct set of rules, expectations, and protocols. These norms and understandings of participation are invisible and unknown to those who are new to the online affinity network. New participants must be socialized into the workings of the affinity network’s subcultural capital and the knowledge and dispositions needed to successfully navigate the affinity network.

At Hogwarts at Ravelry, participants create a learning environment in the image of Hogwarts, the magical school of the Harry Potter series (see figure 3.1; the case study appears at the end of chapter 4). Community members organize creative production around elaborate houses with their own rules, hierarchies, and traditions. New members are sorted into four distinct houses—Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff, and Slytherin—each with its own “common room” thread in the forums. Although people can join the Hogwarts community at any time, they are sorted into houses only during “sort” weeks, or weeks between class rotations. Roughly every six weeks there is a one-week sort period. To fully participate, members must become familiar with Harry Potter lore and language, sometimes even role-playing in ways that demonstrate familiarity with the series. For example, Jen2291, a 49-year-old white woman from Arizona, participated in an Order of the Phoenix game within Hogwarts at Ravelry that organized challenges centered on creative writing. In one of her submissions, she wrote about her family background as a descendant of “Antioch Peverell” and a family who was fascinated with “muggles.” Her career aspirations, she notes, include becoming an “auror” as a result of her disgust for evil “Death Eaters.” She concludes by discussing her special talents for “transfiguration” and her experiences fighting “Dementors.” Understanding and engaging with Jen2291’s shared writing, as well as other activities, such as role-playing and lessons, requires extensive knowledge of the fandom.

Established rules and etiquette for classes offered through Hogwarts at Ravelry must be mastered for participants to forge ahead. New
members often feel intimidated when they first join the community because of the large number of activities and the school-oriented metaphor for participation. New participants must join classes and earn points by submitting their own crafted items and patterns, thus filtering out people who are not serious about joining. Teachers also award bonus points to students who design their own patterns and build their own shapes from scratch. In addition to these established structures for activity and lessons, fandom-centered lore, and formulae for earning points, there are restrictions on the form and content of communications on the forums that include keeping discussion “G”-rated and not being overly critical of others’ projects. Although Hogwarts at Ravelry and the other affinity networks we studied provide various mechanisms to guide new members through their systems for participation, this example shows the many different rules, procedures, linguistic and fandom-related knowledge, and expectations for appropriate communications that are typically unknown to those outside of the subculture.

The StarCraft II community also requires considerable gameplay and technical know-how to be able to fully participate (the case study
appears at the end of chapter 1). As in other complex, competitive games, the learning curve to competency is steep, both cognitively and physically, and elite gamer culture is famously exclusionary. Proficiency in the game requires advanced cognitive capacities for multitasking and problem solving (Glass, Maddox, and Love 2013), as well as lightning-fast physical reflexes, which gamers measure as an “actions per minute” (APM) score (see figure 3.2 for an example of StarCraft II rankings). In addition to performance in the game, players must become fluent and comfortable in the arcane lingua franca and norms of gamer culture as they navigate forums and in-game chat and converse on shared audio channels. Game strategy, terms, and the latest news on various tournaments and players are chronicled through thousands of forums, wikis, and videos. Even to be a competent spectator of an esport such as StarCraft II requires considerable knowledge that is outside the scope of nongamers. Even with a competent screencaster offering commentary, outsiders will find it challenging to understand even the basics of how the match is progressing.

Sackboy Planet, like many online environments, is an attention-scarce marketplace for social exchange (see the case study at the end of this chapter). Because of the incredibly high volume of content and
means through which to interact with other LBP2 players, participants expect that any communications meet certain standards before getting either supportive feedback or any responses at all. These expectations are also not clear to outsiders and must be learned through time. For example, one player reflected that people who are often ignored are those who write only in capital or lowercase letters: “If they’re like ‘ZOMGZ PL@Y MY LEVeLZ PLZ! YOu WIlL LOVe iT! OMG!’ All lower case, run on sentences.” People who communicate in ways that do not use proper forms of English grammar, or who are overly demanding and repeatedly comment or spam the forums, are often characterized by experienced members as “immature children.” As a consequence, those who communicate in these ways often get skipped over or ignored and are effectively squelched from participation. These dialogic expectations are closely tied to success in the formal metrics that operate in the game and in Sackboy Planet. For budding designers to get others to play and review their levels, and to have a shot at earning “likes” or “hearts,” which are among the highest markers of success, community members must be willing to take requests for feedback seriously. If they overtly ask for likes or hearts, or if they demand that people look at their creations without introducing themselves and making an effort to get to know people first, they are stifled from meaningful participation on the road to improving their craft and leveling up.

Directioners on the Wattpad online publishing platform must also learn the appropriate etiquette for sharing feedback on others’ writing if they wish to fully participate (see the end of chapter 2 for the 1D on Wattpad case study). One example of this etiquette is to provide only constructive suggestions; to do otherwise would be a violation of “friend behavior” mandated by the community. For example, Madeleine, a 15-year-old white teen from Canada, explained that “if you aren’t nice to people, no one will stick up for you if you are insulted.” She reflects that when evaluating others’ work, she makes sure she offers supportive comments first: “I would say, ‘Great job, I’m really looking forward to the next Chapter! You’re a great writer! Just be sure to fix the . . . But other than that it’s perfect!’ ” This etiquette is embedded in the subculture among Directioners on Wattpad and must be learned upon entry.

Similarly, professional wrestling community members (see the Wrestling Boards case study at the end of chapter 1) must learn a number of
different rules to participate, and as in *Hogwarts at Ravelry* they must demonstrate their knowledge of the fandom, including the history of wrestling, key contenders, and various terms and nuanced protocols for wrestling matches. Successful participation in the forums also requires following standards for rating and evaluating others’ work, which shapes whether participants’ own work is evaluated and sped along as they learn their craft and level up in the community. For example, participants are expected to rate and evaluate a certain number of shows each week. If their written feedback is too minimal, or is written in a tone considered unacceptable, then they and their work fall in social standing and they have fewer opportunities to participate in matches. Farooq, an 18-year-old African American male from San Diego and a respected member of the community, explains: “This forum isn't sugar coated, people will say what they like, or dislike. And you can tell when someone posts. This is an example of a post by a respected member: ‘I agree that CM Punk is good at the mic, but he is overrated in the ring.’ This is an example of a post by a non-respected member: ‘Fuck CM Punk, he's good at the mic because he is a whining bitch, and he is shit in the ring.’ Respected members give fair ratings to all wrestlers and hesitate from using immature insults.”

Although the *Wrestling Boards* community’s expectations for quality evaluations establish a safe environment for constructive feedback, its rules, understandings, and community-specific knowledge—like those in our other cases—are typically unknown to those who are outsiders to the subculture and are new to participation. Next, we describe the various reputation processes within online affinity networks that members must both reproduce and navigate to participate.

**Online Reputation Systems**

Many of the online affinity networks we studied include design features that denote status and reputation. We typically found that the competitive gaming communities in our study had among the most robust reputation and ranking systems because of the fact that competition and status go hand in hand. For example, members of the professional wrestling community the *Wrestling Boards* have symbols next to users’ profiles that showcase whether they have “Legend” status or not.
According to participants, Legend status indicates to the community that these users have a long history with professional wrestling and participate frequently, and that their posts are upvoted. In the forums, people can like others’ content in order to improve those users’ “reps,” or reputations. Reputation points are awarded by people who read a post and think it is interesting, funny, or worth attention. These different points that reflect users’ reps are accumulated in a database and displayed in ways that reflect a level of status. Similarly, Sackboy Planet hosts a number of different metrics (refer to figure 3.3) that represent a kind of gamification of community experience intended to drive interest and persistence and to create a shared set of benchmarks. These metrics include reputation bars that reflect experience on the website, hearts for high quality levels, and likes for comments.

In the Hogwarts at Ravelry community, badges are awarded to participants who create official stores for their wares or to people who share exemplary work during their instructional lessons, such as completing classes and challenges (see example badge in figure 3.4). The Hogwarts at Ravelry community also uses a competitive point system called “house points” that parallels the Harry Potter series. Through this system, members are awarded points for completing lessons or doing community-valued activities such as designing their own craft patterns or giving items to charities.

In addition to explicit metrics, participants also engage in discursive strategies to improve their own status and to evaluate that of others in the community. On Sackboy Planet, players regularly share their

![Figure 3.3. Screen shot of Sackboy Planet forum ratings, including badges (bottom) for participation.](image)
projects-in-development in a section of the forums devoted to feedback on users’ levels. The forums offer different privacy settings that allow players to bring the kind of attention they want to their products as they gain legitimacy in the community. For example, Luchadoro, a 21-year-old from the United States, was working on a level that had a lot of bugs, and he did not want to share it in a way that everyone would see just yet. But he did want feedback, and so in this early stage of development he used privacy settings on his level to allow only the people he wanted to test it. Luchadoro strategically used the privacy settings in the forums to mediate how others evaluated his work as it was improved. *LBP2* players such as Luchadoro recognize that sharing their creations affects their own standing in the community through how they navigate status systems that involve peer-to-peer evaluation of level creations.

Another example of community status processes can be found through the “booking” system among *Wrestling Boards* writers. Participants
in this community must be committed to their craft through the writing and feedback systems in the forums. If writers are not active and do not write, rate, and provide extensive feedback on others’ posts, their characters or writing are not “booked” for the next show. The standards for booking vary, but they center on impressing other evaluators based on shared expectations of the writing and often require good grammar and demonstrated understanding of the activity guidelines. But if participants meet these standards and their characters are cited in the grand narrative of the fight matches, it is considered a great honor. For example, one participant left feedback on another’s write-up of a character: “It’s awesome! Hopefully James Hammer will be in the next PPV!” To be selected for the upcoming match is a signal by the community that one’s work is high quality.

Status systems within the online affinity networks we examined are durable and are reproduced by participants because they all share a stake in how they function. Status in the One Direction fandom on Wattpad is a complex interaction of platform-based metrics and official competitions, as well as community-driven feedback and “likes.” Some participants leave comments that are defaming, such as calling others’ work “fluff” publicly, and others leave benign or innocuous comments that many participants see as an attempt to game the formal status system. For One Direction fanfiction on Wattpad, the visibility and popularity of created work is increased if there are more comments. If created work reaches the highest level of popularity, those users have a shot at winning the annual Watty Awards that recognize the best work. Participants value substantive feedback and criticize as “unethical” any attempts to increase popularity through “vote trading” and false praise. However, the relationship between feedback and status can also work to support positive learning dynamics, such as through the shared expectation to give honest and constructive feedback. One writer, Ayush, a 19-year-old from India now living in Illinois, gave another writer good feedback on a story. In return, that writer gave helpful feedback on his own write-up.

So far we have described how online affinity networks contain complex subcultures with their own etiquettes and rules, as well as reputational systems that provide members the means through which to evaluate others’ work and confer status. Next, we describe the key role that the highest-status participants play by creating ideals for learning and making.
Elites and Aspirational Standards

Examples of elite participants in our networks make clear how shared standards of expertise give other participants the incentive to improve their craft and succeed. For example, Briana, a 25-year-old white woman from Utah, quickly became a top achiever of her Hogwarts house within *Hogwarts at Ravelry* and was promoted to the role of teacher within a few months of joining. Briana was also a pattern designer and seller, and she used these skills to test patterns for other *Hogwarts* members and to design a *Harry Potter*-inspired pattern for the group. As a teacher, she was tasked with creating assignments that helped students advance their knowledge of the *Harry Potter* universe while instilling important skills in less experienced members. Briana’s “promotion” within the online affinity network was a signal of her rise in status within the community, and her role as teacher enabled her to curate important guides and resources for participants to learn from.

John and Hank Green, also known as the VlogBrothers, are the creators of the YouTube channel around which the *Nerdfighter* online affinity network coalesced (see the case study at the end of chapter 4). The brothers use their elite status to inspire their followers to help the world through community building and even donations to charity. The VlogBrothers’ YouTube videos draw nearly 400,000 views on average, and they meld their interests in “everything nerdy” with an agenda they term “decreasing World Suck.” As the VlogBrothers explain, “World Suck is exactly what World Suck sounds like. It’s hard to quantify exactly, but, you know, it’s like, the amount of suck in the world.” As an example of decreasing World Suck, the VlogBrothers encouraged their fans to create a YouTube video about their favorite charity. In what followed, later termed Project for Awesome, fans uploaded hundreds of videos of their favorite charities and donated $870,000. These donations were then divided among 10 different causes that were voted on by *Nerdfighter* community members. The VlogBrothers used their elite status to rally the online affinity network around video production aimed at public good (see figure 3.5).

In both forums and interviews, *Sackboy Planet* members regularly refer to Sensei, a 25-year-old white male from the United States and a participant whom they hold in very high esteem (see the case study at
the end of this chapter). In an interview, Sensei explained that some time ago he had an idol in the community before he achieved his own level of celebrity. “DarkMatter9 was my idol,” he said. “The levels he made were so awesome that I wanted to know his secret. What was he able to do that I wasn’t?” Idols, or elite affinity network participants, provide inspiration to community members as they learn to develop critical competencies in their craft. Sensei described DarkMatter9 as having a “secret,” or set of skills that Sensei did not yet know but wanted to learn. Until Sensei got to know him better, DarkMatter9 stood as an “inspirational” symbol of achievement, “a huge motivator” on the road to improving himself as a designer.

As Ito (2012a) finds among high-status AMV creators, idols on SacK- boy Planet rarely interact with the general public and instead stay closer to other high-status participants. “Celebrity status helped me reach more people and I could find those people I work well with,” said DarkMatter9, a white male from the United States. “All the people I work with tend to be celebrities themselves . . . I’ve never had someone successfully solicit [level design] help from me through the fan sites . . . it became
tiresome to be constantly helping.” Although elites are less accessible to other community participants, their celebrity was produced, in part, by the content they shared with the community. For example, Sensei created an elaborate set of curated wikis and YouTube videos to teach others to manipulate logic for game design. Other celebrities devote a great deal of time and effort organizing major competitions in the community. On Sackboy Planet, elite participants earn their marks by setting the bar for valued skills and practices and by sharing valued content that the community appreciates. As a result, they create ideals that others in the affinity network aim to achieve.

Members of the StarCraft II affinity network (see the end of chapter 1) all know Day[9]. A former Pan-American StarCraft champion and the owner of the esports company Day[9]TV, the 25-year-old white Californian is a symbol writ large of achievement to StarCraft II players. Leagues such as the War of the States and the North American Star League are examples of national and international competitions in which players test their skills against some of the strongest competitors in the nation. Players such as Day[9] who compete in and win major esports competitions attain a level of celebrity among members of the StarCraft II affinity network. Day[9]’s elite status is based on his success as a competitive player and his instructive videos on how to play the game. Through his work as a commentator on the show Day[9]TV, he sees himself as an “educator” who shares strategy: “Solid play doesn’t revolve around tricks, surprises, or hidden information, but very solid and strong [planning] and crisp execution.” He parlays his status as an elite player and strategist to organize events and high-level partnerships, such as when Facebook developers hosted a tournament he was involved in (for an example of a StarCraft II tournament, see figure 3.6).

In the AMV affinity network (see the Animemusicvideos.org case study, this chapter) AbsoluteDestiny stands out as an accomplished elite who, like Sensei and Day[9], navigated the network’s status system to achieve his social position and later found ways to give back. By posting frequently in the community and giving feedback to others before sharing his own first video, AbsoluteDestiny set the stage for people to give him a chance and help him move forward. As his craft improved, he started to win awards, began attending conventions in the United States, and started establishing himself as a high-status participant. The AMV
community holds his work in high regard, and he uses his position to do important community organizing and management in the interest of other participants. For example, he helps out with design for the website, oversaw administration for the forums for a period, and serves as a judge for competitions at conventions. Our analysis of elites such as AbsoluteDestiny highlights the importance of status to expertise-oriented online affinity networks. Elites provide commonly recognized ideals of skill development and achievement that set the bar high for others to work to achieve. Elites also often serve important purposes within the community, such as curating high-quality informational content so others can learn how to improve their craft.

In this section we have documented how our cases comprise subcultures with various status systems that include their own established rules, requirements, expectations, and linguistic and dialogic standards. Network participants move across these systems as they seek status and recognition, such as when they push out their creations for the community to evaluate. These practices are also tied to formal markers of status, such as gamified currencies or badges. Elites establish ideals for skill development and set the bar high for others as they strive to achieve. High-status participants also engage in curatorial work to provide other participants with opportunities to learn and improve their craft.

Of note are the small numbers of young women elites in our cases. Many women in Ravelry and Wattpad “rose to the top,” but these numbers were fewer in technically elite specialties. Among the exceptions—women players of StarCraft II and on Sackboy Planet, especially—some noted that there might have been some potential gendered barriers as they climbed the ranks. These findings are particularly notable given
that we have actively sought out cases that value inclusivity, knowledge, and expertise. While it is challenging for women players to succeed in any competitive gaming culture, the StarCraft community is at the more positive end of the spectrum in its stance toward women. For example, one elite Street Fighter player quipped that sexual harassment is just part of the culture of fighting games, and if you removed that, “it’s StarCraft” (Hamilton 2012). While we highlight the inclusive dimensions of online affinity networks, we recognize that it takes more than good intentions and a handful of positive exceptions to transform pervasive cultural hierarchies and social exclusions.

All online affinity networks navigate a complex balance between exclusionary and inclusive dynamics; they traffic in insider referents and mark status and achievement, but they must also recruit and retain new members to stay active. The online affinity networks in our study have particularly high standards for shared values, norms, and markers of quality; they also have well-developed ways of welcoming new members and inculcating the norms and standards of the core group. The networks we studied provide examples for how groups can avoid status systems that become unyielding barriers to participation. Online affinity networks that support connected learning maintain low barriers to entry by providing structures that teach subcultural capital to newcomers. In the next section, we describe how the groups we studied balance exclusivity and inclusivity, keeping barriers to entry low and guiding and leveling up new participants.

Leveling Up among Compartmental Intimates

Our cases provide examples of how the norms around earning subcultural capital are taught to new participants so that they can effectively engage with others, improve their craft, and achieve. We find that inclusive online affinity networks develop roles that are designed to welcome and mentor new members. These roles, which are embedded in an existing subculture and its status system, impart subcultural capital that less experienced members need to level up. They are also associated with the new members’ development of compartmental intimates, affinity network–specific relationships that bond them to the shared purpose of the community and support them as they learn and grow.
Teachers, Mentors, and Moderators

In the previous section we described how the online affinity networks we studied boast a social architecture that regulates status within their communities. Here we describe how these thriving networks all have recognized roles for community members who support, guide, and mentor less experienced participants. In many of our cases, veteran participants organize activities that help those who are new to the scene gain subcultural capital. In this way, members who have achieved status and recognition can also contribute to the growth and inclusivity of the online affinity network.

One of the strongest examples of how high-status expert members welcome new members is from the Hogwarts at Ravelry case (see the end of chapter 4). Teachers are cornerstones of life at each of the houses and organize important lessons and activities. Teachers are typically appointed as a result of their successes as students in the community. For example, a course called “Bibliomagic” that was created by group leader KnittingPrincipal, a 43-year-old white woman from Idaho, required students to research and craft something representing the ancient Royal Library of Alexandria and the Harry Potter Durmstrang Institute. To complete these assignments, students needed to learn the Celtic ogham runic alphabet. For this lesson, KnittingPrincipal created links to online resources and encouraged students to report back on what they learned. She also defines the boundaries of appropriate topics. For example, she states in one post that “Hogwarts at Ravelry is completely, 100% non-political with regards to Muggle Elections.” She points participants to other Ravelry groups that do allow political conversations, but she states firmly that she believes that “in an online community, it is far too easy for misunderstandings and hard feeling to occur. . . . I refuse to allow this place—this home—to become sullied by those kinds of disagreements.”

Teachers at Hogwarts also design opportunities within the school structure to induct new participants into the culture and teach appropriate ways of engaging and learning before officially joining a Hogwarts house. New members are directed to the Visiting Wizards Hall, for people who are not yet sorted into houses and which provides a few basic projects to get the feel for creating knits as part of the community. These introductory-level products, termed “school supplies,”
include blanket squares that can be used to make Ron Weasley blankets, a wand, a wizarding pet, and a cauldron. Pattern suggestions are linked for each of these entry-level tasks. While new members are in this starter zone, teachers encourage them to participate in the formal classes. They are awarded points for participating in Visiting Wizards Hall and in the classes, and these points go toward each member’s new house once they are officially sorted. Teachers also encourage new members to participate in forums specific to the house they hope to join. In this way, newbies can ask questions of more experienced members, receive socialization into the banter and role-playing standards of the community, and observe how others successfully participate in the group and during classes. Teachers, invited into their role by rising in status as Hogwarts participants, contribute by creating lessons, activities, and curated resources for participants to learn the lay of the land and improve their skills as knitters. Teachers also design and implement a space for new members to practice learning the ropes of the community and facilitate their full participation once sorted into the houses. These practices help new members develop relationships with their peers and higher-status participants, such as teachers, who impart subcultural capital.

Members of the Bollywood dance affinity network also inhabit important roles that help drive teaching and learning within their community (see the end of chapter 2 for the case study). Captains and lead dancers take on responsibility to support their team members. One leader, Neesha, who lives in California, described it as “basically like running a business.” These leaders set up team goals, organize prop- and video-making activities, and provide their team members with advice on the use of digital tools such as GarageBand and video-production tools. One team leader, Jaya, from Illinois, used video as part of a rehearsal process for her team by recording their dances for later feedback and help. “I think recording was a very good tool because people could actually see what was needed to be improved,” she explained. These leaders serve as organizers and support systems for day-to-day team activities and help to improve their members’ skills in dance and, at times, even digital production.

Sackboy Planet members also ask experienced members to help newcomers to the level-design game learn the lay of the land (see the case study at the end of this chapter). For example, affinity network leaders
identify players who are active and helpful to others to serve as moderators. Moderators typically pursue their work with gusto; being selected by the Sackboy Planet leaders to moderate is considered a flattering recognition of their budding fluency with community practices and procedures. One of the moderators’ tasks is to welcome new members and guide them to resources aimed at socializing them into the community. New players are encouraged to post on a page for “Introductions” to share a bit about themselves and why they joined Sackboy Planet. Every introductory post is responded to within a matter of hours. Many responses to introductory posts are welcoming and identify resources that can help socialize new players into the community: “Hello and welcome to Sackboy Planet! This is the perfect place to you. To help you get started, I’ll provide some links just for you. You might want to check out the Level Arena where you can share ideas you have for new levels to create. You can also ask others for help on your ideas and can receive advice about design.” Players join Sackboy Planet for a variety of reasons, and moderators actively connect with new members to guide them to the resources that might best suit their interests, including specific directions and links to resources provided by other community members on how to improve their skills.

Roles such as moderators, teachers, and mentors are key components of a thriving and inclusive online affinity network, providing valuable learning resources and connection points between more and less experienced members, and defining the scope and tone of shared topics and activities. Just as with many traditional student-mentor relationships, these social relationships are specialized and often compartmentalized to the specific subject at hand. Yet they can be strong and often influential relationships in young people’s lives because they can reorient a learning trajectory or identity. In much the same way that schoolchildren can be shocked to see a teacher out of context in a supermarket or other community setting, the relationships between mentors and mentees are both influential and context specific.

Community-Driven Supports

In the various communication channels of each of the online affinity networks, such as forums or chat rooms, network participants actively
identify and reach out to those who need help, and at times enforce the standards of their network by warding off bullies who would detract from their learning community.

Although moderators on Sackboy Planet serve important roles as educators and welcomers to new participants, everyday members also work to identify low-status participants in need of help and to redirect problematic behavior. For example, when asked if nonmoderators ever step in and do something when they see bad behavior, PonyPal, a 17-year-old Latino from the United States, responded by explaining his own initiative during interaction with others in the forums: “I’ve never been a moderator or administrator or anything and I don’t really care to. But I’m kind of like a non-moderator moderator. I tell people what I think or defuse situations. Or if I don’t do it publicly I’ll write them a private message.” It is not only high-status elites, but also members of the broader community, who mediate conflict and explain to others what the expectations are for dialogue. When an affinity network has shared norms and values that all active participants buy into and support, online communication is responded to iteratively in a distributed way.

Everyday community members actively identify newcomers and reach out to them to provide support. For example, in the Wrestling Boards (see the end of chapter 1 for the case study), new members who need socialization are identified as “marks,” which stands for someone who does not recognize that wrestling is choreographed. Part of the goal of the community is to educate new members who are marks and turn them into what they call “smarks,” or those who are smart and educated about wrestling and the fandom more generally. Part of this socialization process includes learning how to provide feedback, help, and compliments on others’ creative products. Jonathan, a white 16-year-old from the United Kingdom, describes how he interacts with his peers on the forum. “I give and get feedback often about what I do. I often help/mentor new members of the forum to the best of my ability. At the end of the day, we’re all alike and we’re like a family on The Wrestling Boards.” Members of the community who participate in the fantasy wrestling federation are asked at the end of each week to rate the matches and give feedback, and the feedback is expected to meet certain quality standards.

Zach, one of the participants in the fantasy wrestling federation, describes his feedback for the writers: “I really look into [the fantasy
wrestling federation] and try to help them improve it by writing reviews of their work so they can improve.” In one response, a participant’s feedback was far too brief: “Liked the show really good, can’t wait for new show.” In reaction, the poster replied: “Please answer every point I made. We want a good review not just a one sentence one. I even said so in the original post.” As this example shows, reactions to participants’ comments and posts pull others toward the community’s feedback standards. In another example, a reviewer critiqued a misstep in using proper forms of English:

Maven: The lack of proper grammar is strong in these two. No wonder I had to do Heavy Jones’ work for him last week. You’re welcome by the way.

Zach: I lol’d

Maven: @Zach As in it was funny or did I make grammatical errors myself? English is not my mother tongue so I try to keep on a look out for them.

Zach: Nope, it was funny that you called him out because it had been bugging me.

Maven, as a nonnative speaker of English, corrects and edits others’ work as a way to maintain the collective standard of grammar in writing. In this way, everyday members form relationships with others that have the effect of teaching subcultural capital.

The Sackboy Planet community also actively forms relationships with new members to socialize them into standards for participation. For example, earlier we described how participants are expected to share their work in certain ways on the forum; otherwise their work is ignored. Community members reach out to new participants to teach these standards of etiquette. The following is an excerpt from a forum post:

Bluebell: Hey guys I’m new to all of this, but if you could just spend 30 seconds of your time to click this link and subscribe to me, it means a lot.

Rangerguy: Hi and welcome to Sackboy Planet! It’s great to have you here, but here is a suggestion. Before asking people to subscribe to your youtube channel and play your level, maybe tell a tiny bit about
yourself. What brought you to the site, your experience, etc. Most people here are nice and more than happy to help out. Look forward to seeing you around!

**FLOWERPWR:** Welcome to *Sackboy Planet*. Lots of good information above. I agree with Rangerguy, let people get to know you first.

In this conversation between a new user and more experienced participants, members of the community provided guidance to BlueBell in the form of a corrective about appropriate ways to broadcast creative content.

In addition to providing ongoing guidance about community norms, participants also signal transgressive behaviors that inhibit respectful engagement. For example, members of the AMV affinity network (see case study at the end of this chapter) enforce appropriate means through which to share creative products. One editor recounted a time when a participant shared “cat turds” or low-quality work in the wrong way: “Just last night there was some guy on animemusicvideos.org who posted a new thread employing people to take a look at his video because it—and in the video’s description, it was, like, bow to the God, this is the greatest thing ever . . . and everybody is just like, dude, shut up . . . have a little humility. And the thread just deteriorated.” A community norm is that people share their work in ways that are not boastful and convey an openness to feedback and constructive criticism. “They may have potential to do stuff reasonably well,” he noted, “except they squandered the potential because they don’t listen to anybody who doesn’t think their stuff is great.” Network participants react to the tone of forum communications in ways that mark and stifle transgressions.

On *Sackboy Planet*, this takes the form of collectively identifying and policing “trolls.” In one thread, members talked about a user who was using foul language and trying to take people away from the website:

**FROG51:** The troll who claimed to be a community member is some idiot who is swearing over and over and telling people to go to a different forum.

**GOALIE1991:** He’s now posting this comment in every part of the forum. Someone please stop him.
**BigReader:** He's trying to steal people here to go to other places, and his actions are very irresponsible and he is spamming everyone. This is unforgivable behavior!

In this example, swearing and drawing attention away from the forums was identified as a flagrant violation of community standards. On *Sackboy Planet*, as in many online communities, attention from other members is a scarce resource. Both community elites and everyday members invoke the status systems within their online affinity network to identify newcomers in need of help and to ward off behaviors that do not meet their standards of etiquette. Next, we describe how participants reflect on the benefits of these relationships, or compartmental intimates, as they navigate their networks and strive to level up.

**Peer Learning and Leveling Up**

The online affinity networks we examined support a culture of peer learning, in which there is a give-and-take of knowledge and feedback. This can take the form of teacher-student–like relationships, “practice partners” who spar with one another in online games, or simply fans and fellow enthusiasts who geek out together on insider knowledge. The resulting relationships offer valuable information as well as emotional support from people who share the same passions, interests, and concerns. For example, Sensei, the highly regarded level designer introduced above in our discussion of elites, explained how close personal relationships on *Sackboy Planet* were key to his development. When he was new to playing *LittleBigPlanet 2* he spent six months trying to learn how to design on his own, but when he found *Sackboy Planet* and met other creators, his learning reached a new level. “I saw that people were putting out tutorials and saw what people were making and from there it just took off.” Through this he found examples of people’s work that created things he did not know “the editor was capable of doing.” He was ecstatic, exploring and trying new things. “From there it just got a whole new level of depth.” He was an active participant on the forum, connecting with other members by asking for help and also offering solutions to others’ design questions. As he gained expertise, he was eventually rewarded by being asked to be a moderator. The relationships Sensei
developed, which emerged from the moderators’ shared design and troubleshooting activities, provided the groundwork for his elite status.

In another example, Nick, a 20-year-old Asian male from the United States and a participant in the Wrestling Boards, explained how his new friends in the network spurred his learning. For about 12 years before he joined the Wrestling Boards, Nick would casually watch wrestling with friends locally, enjoying the action but not really mastering the jargon or participating in story lines or in-depth analysis of the wrestlers. “Before [joining the Wrestling Boards] I did not used to go on to WWE sites, read WWE news/spoilers, or even knew any wrestling terms,” Nick said. “I did not even know what a heel [villainous wrestler] or face [heroic wrestler] meant. I always used to refer them as the good guy and the bad guy.” However, joining the forum “helped [him] a lot.” As a consequence of his participation on the Wrestling Boards, Nick developed expertise in the vocabulary needed to write wrestling matches.

In addition to being a source of information, the relationships that youth formed in the online affinity networks we studied provided emotional support and bonded youth to the shared purpose of their community. For example, Earth, a 21-year-old from Illinois and a member of Hogwarts at Ravelry (see the end of chapter 4), explained that her friendships in the community create a safe environment. “It’s an active group and even now, I still relate to them a lot,” she explained. “We talk a lot and ask lots of questions in different threads about all sorts of things. It’s a place I go where I feel safe to say what I want.” The relationships that network participants develop can provide emotional support for challenges members face both in and outside of the community. For example, Hogwarts at Ravelry members encourage each other as they apply for jobs, finish homework for school, struggle with a child’s illness, or even mourn the loss of a husband. Jen2291 explains:

I love the social aspect. Since I don’t get to talk to real live people very often . . . the groups are my coffee klatch and watercooler all rolled into one . . . it helps keep me sane to be able to talk with folks . . . and to have them understand my fondness for yarn is a huge bonus. I can joke, I can share my projects, and I can ask for sympathy if I’ve had a hard day . . . I can peruse projects at 3 a.m., dream of challenge ideas, and feel part of something larger than just me sitting here by myself.
Members of the online affinity networks we examined develop friendships that provide informational and emotional supports to not only develop skills needed for success but also persist as learners who can face challenges they encounter along the way. These friendships are specific to the activities of their communities, and as such are best understood as a unique form of compartmental intimates who are situated within online subcultures where they play and learn.

**Conclusion: Bonds but Rarely Bridges**

The online affinity networks we studied share vibrant subcultures with complex systems of status that establish important ideals, maintain order, and cultivate budding crafters, designers, and writers. By drawing out examples of elites from several cases, we described how these experts within online affinity networks provide inspirational guides to new participants as they level up within their communities. Each of these affinity networks has its own distinct rules, standards, etiquettes, and protocols for appropriate dialogue that are often unknown to outsiders and new entrants. Teachers and mentors, as well as everyday members of these online affinity networks, reach out to new members to teach the network-specific know-how needed to participate. These processes for teaching valued competencies, or subcultural capital, are embedded in the same status systems that create exclusive groups of elites. To maintain an inclusive environment, communities must offer opportunities for newcomers to be guided by participants recognized as experienced and of high status.

The status, reputation, and feedback systems of learning-oriented online affinity networks provide an architecture that fosters bonding and learning in a specialized interest. In interviews, members reflected on the profound impact that these friendships had on their capacity to dream big and achieve. They also described how they were able to power ahead despite major obstacles they faced as a result of the acts of caring their online friends provided one another. Online affinity networks provide access to social networks and subcultural capital that are not otherwise available to young people in their local context, and they can diversify a young person’s network in profound and unpredictable ways. Finding others who share and celebrate their niche interests,
passions, and identities can be a heady experience that fuels engagement and learning.

We have selected groups that have potential for connection to academic, civic, and career domains, though many of the subcultural and peer-learning dynamics are also common to other online affinity networks that have robust participation around any specialized area of interest. “Specialized and intentional” does not necessarily translate to “nice,” however. Online affinity networks run the gamut from those that thrive on trash talk and aggression to others, like the ones we studied, that embrace a friendlier and more inclusive ethos (Gee and Hayes 2010). It is impossible to gauge how prevalent welcoming and friendly groups are in comparison to harsher ones. With the rise of movements such as #gamergate, online hate groups, and toxic fandoms, we cannot ignore the dark side of online affinity networks. While these groups were not the focus of our study, we can extrapolate from our study that maintaining community norms, whether nice or nasty, requires ongoing investment. Striving for inclusive and troll-free online affinity networks is an effort that requires collective investment and development.

Additionally, this chapter and our study focus on those who navigate status systems to level up, but the majority of participants in the online affinity networks we studied do not climb to the top of the status ladder as part of their participation. For example, some of the youth we interviewed preferred to primarily hang out socially with others online rather than link these friendships to their creation and learning activities. None of the youth we interviewed were less social participants (or lurkers), likely a consequence of our sampling methods through social channels within these networks. Lurkers can learn through consuming information and observing interactions on curated wikis or forum posts, but they are not involved in the status and reputation dynamics we describe in this chapter. These learners may be recognized for their skills and knowledge in other settings in their family or local community, but our study design does not give us insight into the practices of participants who do not actively contribute. What we do know is that online affinity networks like those in our study reach large audiences who find value in the forums, how-to’s, and YouTube videos that they produce, and that young people are increasingly relying on these kinds of resources for learning (Ito et al. 2010). Members of the online affinity
networks in this study recognize that full participation can be challenging for many people, and therefore they work to keep barriers to participation low and share resources openly online. The benefits of learning, recognition, and belonging we described clearly accrue most significantly to those who are active participants. Likely significant though more diffuse benefits we have not investigated accrue to those who are lurking and grazing through related online resources.

Despite the learning benefits that come with participation in the subcultures of expertise-oriented online affinity networks, we find that they impose limitations on the extent to which learners’ skills may be translated into greater opportunity beyond their interest group. Just as members spoke about the fascinating cultural forms and day-to-day routines that are unique to their subcultures online, they also periodically joked that those outside of the online affinity network would have no clue what it is that they did there—let alone how the skills they developed could be bridged into educational achievement at school or even into career opportunities. This observation stands in contrast to what Small (2009) finds at child-care centers, where compartmental intimates form within an organization that shares ties to other institutions, including the state. The online affinity networks that we describe here share few connections of this kind. As we explore in the next chapter, this affects the extent to which youth can apply the skills they develop from leveling up online with other key spheres of their lives, such as family, school, and career.