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The Aesthetic Production and Distribution of Image/Subjects among Online Youth

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ABSTRACT In this article the authors consider how youth engage in social practices of identity through their online practices with images. Although they build on social practice perspectives, informed by the new literacy studies, they question the extent to which such perspectives have created new autonomies and separations, including the separation of texts from sensation and from the body. An essential part of interpreting imaging identity practice, they argue, involves understanding how people relate to images aesthetically. Through affect, desire, and sensory immersion, we might begin to understand how images become both intensely personalized and broadly distributed. Data in the article are drawn from a larger ethnographic study of the offline and online literacies of youth across school and home contexts. Analyses focus on two cases: Sophia, who remixes, modifies, and trades images to build a website for a punk rock band, and Brian, who modifies and constructs images for online game-play. Analyses of these data are informed by social practice perspectives on identity, by the domains or 'strada' of media practices, and by postmodern perspectives on figural signification.

Introduction

Literacy and new media theorists have argued for the importance of the image in new literacies and media. Some of this work has focused upon the material affordances and qualities of printed texts and books, as contrasted to the qualities and affordances of images and the screen (Kress, 2003), while other work has emphasized the range of modalities and media that are drawn upon within literacy practice as a process of design (New London Group, 1996). In this article we consider how the social practices with images that we have observed in our research on the everyday digital literacies of youth are also social practices of identity. An essential part of interpreting imaging as a social practice, we argue, involves understanding how individuals relate to images aesthetically – as pleasing, stylish, 'cool', beautiful, or tasteful – and how this valuing itself is socially and culturally produced. Greater attention to aesthetic attachments helps us understand how imaging practices, in addition to expanding the canon of traditional literacy, constitute social relations and social capital.

In discussing images and identity practice, we put forward a conception of imaging that is distinct from a general conception of literacy, writ large, as social practice. New literacy studies have focused upon the 'design' of multimodal texts, including how designs routinely involve 'redesign' or drawing upon other texts and discourses (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). We question and critique the abstraction of the multimodal perspective in two ways. First, in striving to posit an expansion of media resources in new media practices, the multimodal perspective elides important differences between types of medium. Linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial, and multimodal resources are grouped together as 'resources' for meaning-making and for rethinking pedagogy, rather than adequately distinguished as involving distinct social practices (New London Group, 1996).

Secondly, multimodal perspectives often place much more emphasis upon meaning-making than on affective or aesthetic attachment. The relations of persons to texts are strategic and rational, involved in 'design' and 'work', including the 'design' of 'social futures' (New London Group, 1996), rather than embodied, sensual, and involved in personal attachments and cultural affiliation. In critiquing an autonomous perspective on literacy, or in asserting the co-constitution of literacy and social, political, and cultural life, we question the extent to which social practice perspectives have created new autonomies and separations, including the separation of texts from sensation and from the body.

We are concerned in this article with the everyday, routine digital imaging practices of two youth, Sophia and Brian. We argue that online imaging practices should be understood as occurring at the intersection of the personal, cultural, and social, and that this intersection should be understood as affecting aesthetic attachment. The 'heart', as it were, of identity work should be reconceived as not merely about intentional or rational 'design' work, but also about the remixing and distribution of affective intensities. Through affective relations, desire, and sensory immersion, we might begin to understand how images become both intensely personalized and broadly distributed. In building this argument, our analysis in the following is based upon data from a larger ethnographic study of the literacy practices of youth in online and offline environments (a study termed 'Synchrony'), which we summarize following the discussion of theoretical backgrounds.

Theoretical Backgrounds

In framing this article we draw on work that expands current conceptions of identity and literacy as social practices. First, we briefly describe work in social practice theories of identity, focusing in particular on work that argues that identity cannot be conceived in either macro (social and cultural) or micro (psychological) units, but must rather be thought of as always in circulation between intensely personal and powerfully social forces. Secondly, in order to conceptualize the multiple articulations of meaning and aesthetic value in imaging practices, we draw upon Kress & Van Leeuwen's (2001) four 'strada' of practices, and in particular the under-analysed practices of 'production' and 'distribution'. This general semiotic perspective argues for a broad perspective on language, bodies, artifacts, buildings, and so on, all entering into signifying relations. Thirdly, we draw on theory that argues for a particular semiotic, or a semiotic of images that is quite distinct from that of, say, written language. In this perspective, imaging practices cannot be subsumed under a general semiotic understanding. From cultural and media studies, we theorize how aesthetic engagement is tied up with collapsing distinctions between signs, signifiers and referents; relations to images involve embodied desire and aesthetic engagement. While this conception of aesthetic engagement via figural signification may seem at odds with a general semiotic perspective, we posit that these orientations provide a productive tension for interpreting Sophia and Brian's activity as practices of identity.

Hybrid Identity-in-Practice

A key orientation of the social practice theory of identity work developed by Dorothy Holland and colleagues (e.g. Holland et al, 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001) involves conceiving of resources for positioning and identity as simultaneously social and personal. The ethnographic investigation of social practices of positioning acts as a window into the ways in which resources for identity, including personas constructed through media and discourse, are hybrid entities when we study them in social practice (Holland & Leander, 2004). The personal and the social concurrently participate in a broader, productive process of identity that involves media, discourse, bodies, the imagination, emotion, power relations, artifacts, and human agency. In order to study identity, we must develop concepts and a language that moves beyond units that are only social, or psychological, or cultural. Hybrid units of identity include, for example, Bourdieu's habitus (1977), and 'history in person' (Holland et al, 1998; Holland & Lave, 2001), which frames identity and subjectivity as originating and continuing to develop in persons and institutions.

More recently, the notion of identity 'lamination' has been proposed (Holland & Leander, 2004) as a means of thinking through various dimensions of hybrid practices of identity. Among

other things, lamination is a metaphor for thinking about the ways in which episodes of positioning can produce traces in the minds and bodies of participants, as well as material artifacts, which resonate with contemporary events. The taking of bridal photographs in Taiwan, for example, involves positioning in the moment (Adrian, 2004), yet this practice also congeals an artifact in time-space that is carried over into other time-spaces and is laminated with other artifacts, which can become important in mediating a person's sense of herself (Holland & Leander, 2004). Together, these associations or laminations, especially in the case of numerous related episodes, can 'thicken' (Holland & Lave, 2001).

Taken together, the ideas of hybridity and lamination in a social practice theory of identity are important for our present project in two primary ways. First, while work in media studies and new literacy studies has often emphasized a critical discursive or culturalist position on the social construction of identity, hybridization prompts us to focus our attention at the intersection of the social, cultural, and psychological. In particular, practices of positioning are often emotionally laden for participants, involving anger, passion, laughter, fear, shame, and other powerful emotions (Hicks, 2004; Satterfield, 2004). Assuming agency with respect to resources of identity, including accepting, rejecting, or taking up positions, in part involves emotional response. At present, we are particularly interested in the emotional responses associated with images, or the manner in which image attachment is not merely a matter of distanced 'taste' but may involve figural immersion in the image. If we do not understand such emotional and personal responses, we fail to understand the ways in which images are brought into social and cultural circulation.

Secondly, the notion of lamination is useful as it allows us to conceive of hybrid entities that, even though joined, continue to be heterogeneous. Within laminates, unlike alloys or other blends, one can continue to find the traces of social, cultural, and personal resources, and continue to recognize tensions and contradictions among these resources. This notion is of particular interest as we consider how individuals participate and assume agency in media processes of production and distribution, considered below.

Imaging and the Four Strada of Semiotic Practice

There are probably a number of reasons for the separation of the communicative from the aesthetic in literacy studies, or for a view of the aesthetic as 'ornamental' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 25), including the Enlightenment separation of the mind/rationality from the body/sensory pleasures, and even the ways in which post-structuralist theorizations of aesthetic pleasure have sometimes positioned semiotic meaning and aesthetic pleasure as oppositional (critiqued by Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 70). In contrast, an integrative view of semiotic meaning and pleasure values the modes and materiality of diverse semiotic objects and our embodied and mindful experiences of them. Following Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001), we assert that pleasures or 'un-pleasures' are always attached to meanings, and a 'vital aspect of communication':

> Communication never just 'communicates', 'represents' and 'expresses', it also always and at the same time affects us. The two cannot be separated. Even when communication seeks to do the opposite, the very fact of negating materiality affects us – by failing to engage us affectively. (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 71)

In a general semiotic approach, which seeks for connection building, the communicative use of images (e.g. the ways in which they represent and express meanings) is related to their aesthetic uses, or the ways in which they engage people affectively (p. 41).

Another possible reason for the separation of the communicative from the aesthetic is that we fail to recognize where imaging practices are located. For example, in the case of digital literacies, we may not identify as important forms of practice forms of work and pleasure that are distant from the 'raw' production of linguistic texts, including cutting and pasting, resizing, coloring, and arranging pastiches. To further this critique, to construct a means of recognizing imaging practice, we draw on a framework developed by Kress & Van Leeuwen (2001), which relates four domains or 'strada' of practices: discourse, design, production, and distribution. Their perspective recognizes how a vast array of media practices, from creating highly original architectural plans to faithfully recording a musical concert, participate in the production of meaning. The basis of distinction

between the strada is the balance between the content and expression of communication. More toward the content side of the scale are the 'discourse' and 'design' strada, while moving toward the expression side are 'production' and 'distribution'. Although writing is more clearly associated with discourse and design, modern communication technologies push toward production and distribution (p. 20). Semiotic practices relate, organize and separate these strada in different ways; the point is not to pigeonhole particular practices in different strada, but rather to consider how different forms of articulation construct social relations through semiotic practices. Moreover, as new semiotic practices emerge (e.g. downloading music), we would expect to see new forms of articulation and therefore further stratification and emergent forms of social organization.

Kress & Van Leeuwen use the term 'strada' to associate their work with Hallidayan functional linguistics, and build a clearer relationship between the strada and Goffman's participation framework (Goffman, 1981). Discourse is akin to Goffman's notion of the 'principal', or 'someone whose position is established by words that are spoken', while design is akin to the Goffman's notion of the 'author', or the person 'who has selected sentiments that are expressed and the words in which they are encoded' (Goffman, 1981, p. 144). Production, further toward expression on the scale, is somewhat akin to Goffman's notion of the 'animator' of the message, yet Kress & Van Leeuwen are clear to point out that, unlike animation, they do not see production as the 'execution' of a message, nor do the consider the animator as a 'sounding box' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 86). Rather, the producer, like all other participants, is vitally involved in producing or articulating meanings, and this is true even in contexts where these tasks are socially separated. Perhaps most importantly, and beyond the particularities of the relations between these systems, they consider semiotic meaning-making as organizing different social relations, which certainly cannot be captured in simplistic 'speaker/hearer' or 'message recipient/nonrecipient' binaries. While Goffman critiques the simplistic analysis of participation in the situated analysis of talk, Kress & Van Leeuwen extend his critique to argue that all participation, in broadly circulating social fields and drawing upon all semiotic modes, is tied up with making meaning.

Kress & Van Leeuwen define 'discourse' as 'socially constructed knowledges of (some aspect of) reality' (2001, p. 4), noting that people often have many discourses available to them and select from among them. While Kress & Van Leeuwen do not offer a well-developed discussion of relations of power and discourse, their description of discursive practice seems consistent with those of other critical discourse theorists (e.g. Gee, 1990; Fairclough, 1992). The interrelation of discourse and modality is central to their interests. This interrelation begins to be worked out in the practice of design, where one uses semiotic resources, in all semiotic modes, to 'realize' discourses. Also realized in design is the particular communication situation itself, 'which changes socially constructed knowledge into social (inter-) action' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 5). Design, in Kress & Van Leeuwen's conception, functions at a more abstract level than the production of media for broad public dissemination and use. Rather, they point to the architectural blueprint or the musical score as key examples to describe how designs inform productions further down the expression side of practice (production and distribution) (p. 21).

We draw primarily upon the production and distribution strada in the analysis of imaging practices because we believe that these strada have not been theorized and analysed enough in literacy practices; we have few well-developed analyses of how material production and distribution 'produce layers of signification' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 20). Production and distribution offer us a conceptual language for the imaging practices of youth in ways that cannot well be captured by the notions of discourse and design alone. While design places emphasis upon mode, production emphasizes medium. That is, a particular *discourse* (e.g. about the failure of national security) can be realized in any number of ways; it may be *designed* within a narrative mode, which is then (or simultaneously) *produced* in the medium of a printed newspaper article. Production, then, refers to the 'to the actual material articulation of the semiotic event or the actual material production of the semiotic artefact' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 6). Kress & Van Leeuwen are quick to point out that the skill-set used in semiotic production – 'technical skills, skills of the hand and the eye' (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p.6) – is distinct from that used in design, although one person may be simultaneously involved in both strada of practice. Most pivotal to Kress & Van Leeuwen's argument is that production does not simply 'realize' designs in a straightforward, mechanical way (p. 66); rather, the specificities of material production, including the physical qualities and affordances of materials used (such as paint, clay, digital images, or

construction paper), shape new meanings. Examining production as a material process is essential to avoiding the field's tendency toward psychologizing (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 70) and abstract semiotic activity.

Distribution, lying at the expressive end of the continuum, tends to be seen as non-semiotic, or not adding meaning (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 7). Kress & Van Leeuwen use the term 're-code' rather than 'record' to emphasize how distribution is saturated with semiotic work. Distribution refers to the technical 're-coding' of semiotic products and events, for purposes of recording (e.g. tape recording, digital recording) and/or distribution (e.g. radio and television transmission, telephony) (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 21).

Although distribution technologies are often intended for reproducing rather than producing meanings, over time these technologies acquire semiotic potentials of their own. For instance, Kress & Van Leeuwen note how the discolorations in old film prints make new meanings available (2001, p. 21), and how deceptively simple reproduction or distribution practices, such as audio recording, include a range of choices (such as microphone distance) that open up new semiotic choices (p. 87). Distribution involves its own continuum, at one end of which we find the precise or 'faithful' recording of an original production, whereas at the other end the original disappears altogether and the distinction between distribution and production collapses (p. 95).

Figural Signification as Aesthetic Experience

Kress & Van Leeuwen critique post-structuralist theorists like Julia Kristeva for their oppositions of pleasure and desire on the one hand and meaning-making on the other (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 70). At present, we consider further Kress & Van Leeuwen's own desire to have an integrative perspective and yet engage postmodern and post-structuralist perspectives on imaging as a different, unique form of semoisis that involves aesthetic attachment. Drawing primarily on Susan Sontag and Jean-Francois Lyotard's early work, Scott Lash (1988) makes a broad distinction between modernity and postmodernity, based not on the overturning of grand narratives (*à la* Lyotard) but on the contrast between 'differentiation' and 'de-differentiation'. While modernization, as a process, results from creating endless distinctions and separations or 'differentiation' (*Ausdifferenzierung*), postmodernization results from 'de-differentiation' (*Entdifferenzierung*). De-differentiation takes many forms in postmodernity: in the refusal to separate the author from her work or the audience from the performance, and in the breakdown of the boundary between literature and theory, high and popular culture, and the cultural and the social (Lash, 1988, p. 312).

Lash's perspective is that differentiation (modernization) and de-differentiation (postmodernization) are both operative in social and cultural life, but involve different semiotics: discursive and figural. Some of Lash's arguments concerning these distinctions (themself, of course, a form of differentiation) are summarized in Figure 1.

Discursive Signification	Figural Signification
priority to words	priority to visual, images
values formal qualities of cultural objects	devalues formalisms, values juxtaposition
rationalist view of culture	contests rationalist view of culture
emphasizes meanings of texts	emphasizes what text do
ego over id	advocates the extension of the primary (Freudian) processes into the cultural realm
operates through distancing from cultural object	operates through the spectator's immersion in the cultural object

Figure 1. Discursive and figural signification. Source: Lash (1988, pp. 313-314).

Semiotically, a key distinction between discursive and figural signification is developed from the relationships of signifier, signified, and referent. In particular, the image loses some of its differentiation from the referent by its iconicity:

> To signify via figures rather than words is to signify iconically. Images or other figures which signify iconically do so through their resemblance to the referent. And signifiers (figures) which

> resemble referents are less fully differentiated from them than signifiers (words, discourse) which do not. (Lash, 1988, p. 331)

To further his analysis of the postmodern reduction in difference between signifier and referent, Lash considers the surrealists at length, and how surrealists 'suggest that we experience everyday life as if its materiality were a network of signifiers' (Lash, 1988, p. 332).

Lash's analysis of the figural and of de-differentiation recruits a dizzying number of allies (surrealists, Lyotard, film critics, Sontag, Artaud, and Eco) and pushes toward a devaluing of meaning in the modernist sense, which is substituted by an articulation of meaning, pleasure, and action, where semiotic activity is not merely a critique of life but rather, as in Sontag's (1969) writing, an extension of or a 'supplement' to life (Lash, 1988, p. 315). For Sontag (1967) and Lash, text and everyday life are not counterposed; rather, the 'overloaded' signifier (the image) is seen as not too different from the referent. The 'cool' aesthetic of words and critical distance is replaced by the 'erotics of art' and an 'aesthetics of sensation' (Lash, 1988). Relations to images or to any text in a figural semiotic are immersive: one experiences and desires the image by falling 'into' it, as it were, by collapsing the distances between self and image, image and meaning, and image and referent.

Method

Study Background

Data for this research are taken from a larger ethnographic study of the everyday communication practices of seven youth in online and offline contexts, a study termed 'Synchrony'. Case studies developed from this project traced how adolescent youth use new information and communication technologies (ICTs, including instant messaging, chat, email, searching the Internet and building websites), and how ICT use was related to face-to-face and online literacy practices in school. The goal of the large study was to examine the relations of diverse literacy practices, social space, and identity. The present study considers only data collected in home (online) environments.

The key informants for the present research were Brian and Sophia (all names are pseudonyms). Brian was a 13-year-old European American youth, who lived outside a small town (pop. 6,000) in the mid-South with his brother and parents. Brian was new to his school in the year of our research, having just moved from the Midwest. Sophia, also European American and 13 years old, lived in town with her father. The school Sophia and Brian attended, Tyler Middle, had 770 students (75% European American, 16% African American, 6% Latino or Latina, and 3% Asian). At this school 25% of the students were entitled to free or reduced-price lunches.

Brian had little competition from family members for access to a recent-model personal computer with a cable modem. He spent, on average, two to three hours per day in online activity, which often involved playing massively multiplayer online games (MMOGs). These online environments are graphically rich, three-dimensional video games in which a participant creates his or her character and then uses this character to interact with the game environment as well as with characters controlled by other online players. Sophia's activity was quite distinct from Brian's, and involved creating a website, frequent instant messaging, some chatroom activity, online research, and the collection of images, as described in the analysis.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study made use of a number of ethnographic techniques and was informed by assumptions of interpretive-constructivist research (Erickson, 1986; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Data collection was also informed by emerging perspectives advocating an analysis of online activity not as isolated from material, embodied activity, but as interpolated in complex ways with local, material geographies (Baym, 1998; Hine, 2000). Data were collected through screening surveys, interviewing, field notes, the collection of written artifacts from classrooms, digital capture of online interaction using Spector Pro, and videotaping of online interaction using a digital video camera. Brian was observed at least once each week in his English and history classes from February to June of 2003, and his coursework from these classes was collected during these visits.

Sophia changed schools early on in the study, and was only observed in school through mid-March of 2003. Bi-weekly home observations of online literacy practices, including computer gaming, also began in February and continued through June (Sophia) and August (Brian) of 2003. Each home visit lasted approximately one and a half to two hours and consisted of observing and asking questions about the youths' practices during their online activity. Brian and Sophia were also formally and informally interviewed on several occasions throughout the study concerning their literacy practices; most interviews beyond the initial screening interview were discourse-based, shaped around one of their texts or textual practices.

Data Analysis

Our analytic process has involved analytic review of the body of ethnographic data, interpretive coding of this data, cross-comparison of interpretations, triangulation across the data, and member-checking. Our approach to coding has been shaped through a critique of discursive signification. Thus, even as we have relied upon modernist processes of coding, comparison, and triangulating data, we have attended not merely to patterns but also to participants' lived and sensory relations to various forms of activity. To interpret 'aesthetic attachments' or investments and identifications with aesthetic practices and resources, we have attended especially to the participants' explicit aesthetic judgments, to intensities of activity, to the extension of activity over time, to attention to detail, and to related qualities that focus on the production and distribution of affect, in contrast to emphasizing message and meaning alone.

Data and Analysis

Sophia

Sophia's favorite band was the popular punk band Good Charlotte, and her favorite band member was the lead singer, Joel, who in her opinion was the 'cutest'. Over several weeks, before our research began and during it, Sophia spent many hours browsing Good Charlotte websites for photographs of Joel. She later expanded her search to include photos of the band as a whole and each of its individual members. Sophia downloaded these photographs, saved them on her desktop, and then individually placed them in folders on her hard drive. She ended up creating a folder for each of the band's members as well as combinations of its members (such as 'Benji and Joel') (Figure 2). The system was very organized and very aesthetically pleasing to her.

A primary reason that Sophia chose to organize the photos in folders was that she hated to have clutter on her desktop; very rarely did she ever have more than two icons displayed on her desktop for a significant length of time. The folders of images transparently displayed small icons of the photos that they included.

Even from the fairly simple activity of downloading and organizing photographs of the band members, we can begin to consider Sophia's imaging practices. At this point, Sophia participates primarily in the distribution of the images by selecting and downloading them. Yet, in this transfer, Sophia also adapts the images to her desktop; the photos do not stay in the screen positions or sizes in which she found them, but are collapsed as jpg files and organized into folders. This adaptation to her desktop as a new context is also a preliminary form of assembly, since she begins to organize photographs from different web locations together in folders; this assembly as an aesthetic form is most apparent in considering how the transparent folders display their image contents, assembled in way original to Sophia's desktop. Sophia's organization of the photographs serves both practical and aesthetic functions: the band members' photographs as well as her tidy organization of them are both aesthetically pleasing to her.

Figure 2. Sophia's desktop.

Sophia not only collected photographs, however, she also manipulated them, placed them on backgrounds she created and overlaid the images with simple texts:

> Sophia has been making graphics recently. The first one she shows me is of Benji. She cut out a picture of him and pasted it onto a white background. Then she chose a font and color, and wrote his name and positioned it. Then she added colors and designs for the background. She minimized the image to 32 by 32 or something like that, then put it in a Windows file, then put it in a desktop icon folder, and eventually replaced her previous icon with the new one she created. She also did one of Chris. She did not do one of Joel because she could not find a picture small enough ... she doesn't want his head to take up the entire icon. (Field notes, 23 April 2003)

In selecting, manipulating, and organizing the images, Sophia did not simply collect images of the band or reorganize them, but was engaged in selecting particular images that would translate well to appearing as icons on her desktop. She also produced colored image backgrounds and name texts, using readily available computer tools, and laminated these with the photographs, further moving the images toward a personal aesthetic.

After Sophia had collected a large number of photographs, she made collages out of some of them. For example, using all of her favorite pictures of Joel, she designed a collage that later became her computer's wallpaper (Figure 3). Sophia used 16 different pictures, large and small, in the formation of this collage. She also included in this collage a small graphic of the word 'joel' written in colorful bubble letters. Though wallpaper is mainly seen only when one logs on and off the computer, Sophia was very aware of the wallpapers she produced and was regularly involved in producing new versions. In five months, we had visual evidence of nine wallpaper changes, although there were probably many more that were unrecorded. Six of the nine that we collected data on were photographs of the entire band, which were re-coded as Sophia's screen image

(Figure 4), while two were band image collages and one a pre-packaged landscape template from her operating system.

Figure 3. Sophia's *Good Charlotte* collage and desktop (or wallpaper) 2.

Sophia's collage of images of Joel nicely illustrates a process of assembly, or creating new meaning from fragments collected from the flow of circulating images in which she inserted herself. In Goodwin's terms, Sophia's work is a kind of 'postmodernist sampling', in that she 'creates works pre-existing materials without placing them in quotation marks, as it were' (cited in Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, p. 96). The images – selected, cropped, resized, and organized and displayed in a particular configuration – were work that Sophia took seriously and took pleasure in. She spent a large amount of time on her computer when she was in her room at home (varying between one and five hours, depending upon other activities) and treated her computer screen and wallpapers as a valued and personalized aesthetic space. From our ethnographic observations in her home, we were surprised that the aesthetics of Sophia's screen space were bounded from the aesthetics of the material space of her bedroom, in which her computer was located. Although one might have expected to see posters of Good Charlotte or other bands in the bedroom, the room itself, decorated in Pepto-Bismol pink, displayed various 'Hello Kitty' items. While both spaces were saturated with popular culture images, the different aesthetics of the spaces suggest some degree of bounding of offline and online identities, or perhaps distinct younger (bedroom) and older (computer wallpaper) versions of her popular culture affinities.

On the one hand, Sophia seemed to want her collection of band photos to be encyclopedic, as she continued to add to it, yet she also developed her own aesthetic criteria for sorting 'good' from 'bad' photos as her collection grew. An important criterion for good photos of Joel, for instance, was that they should not hide his face behind the microphone. She also wanted photographs that showed the band members from 'good angles', and especially enjoyed photographs of the band members offstage as 'regular people', including, for example, a valued photograph of Joel holding a puppy.

Figure 4. Sophia's Desktop 3.

What began merely as a vast collection of images, stored in various folders and occasionally turned into collages, became a much larger project for Sophia. Around the time of her spring break from school (mid-March, 2003), Sophia decided to design a website for Good Charlotte fans. She planned to include all of the images she had spent weeks gathering on her website. In fact, her main motivation for designing the site was to have an arena in which she could display and share her collection of images, and often described the project as creating a 'museum' for Good Charlotte fans to visit. Sophia began creating a site using a website builder called Angelfire, but abandoned this after a few days. Sophia then transferred her energies to completing an unfinished website being built on Tripod, a different website builder (Figure 5). This unfinished website was given to Sophia by a 16-year-old acquaintance who she knew in both face-to-face and online contexts.

The beginning of Sophia's website building illustrates distinct ways in which distribution practices are productive of aesthetic valuing and particular forms of communicative and aesthetic work. First, Sophia at this point had turned the cycle of distribution from personal collecting to making a publicly available resource. Secondly, in producing the resource for the public, and especially for a Good Charlotte affinity group (Gee, 2003), Sophia recruited other communicative and aesthetic tools (website builders) and resources (an unfinished website). The project abandoned by Sophia's friend and given to her illustrates, on the one hand, how affinity grouping works by the sharing of common resources for communicating and creating a group aesthetic, and on the other hand, how Sophia did not approach her work with an assumption about 'originality' that may be more common to youth working with image design in non-digital environments. Rather, just as Sophia's original collection work heavily relied on circulating photographs that were newly produced in her processes of distribution-as-re-coding (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), so Sophia's entire website began as a borrowed product.

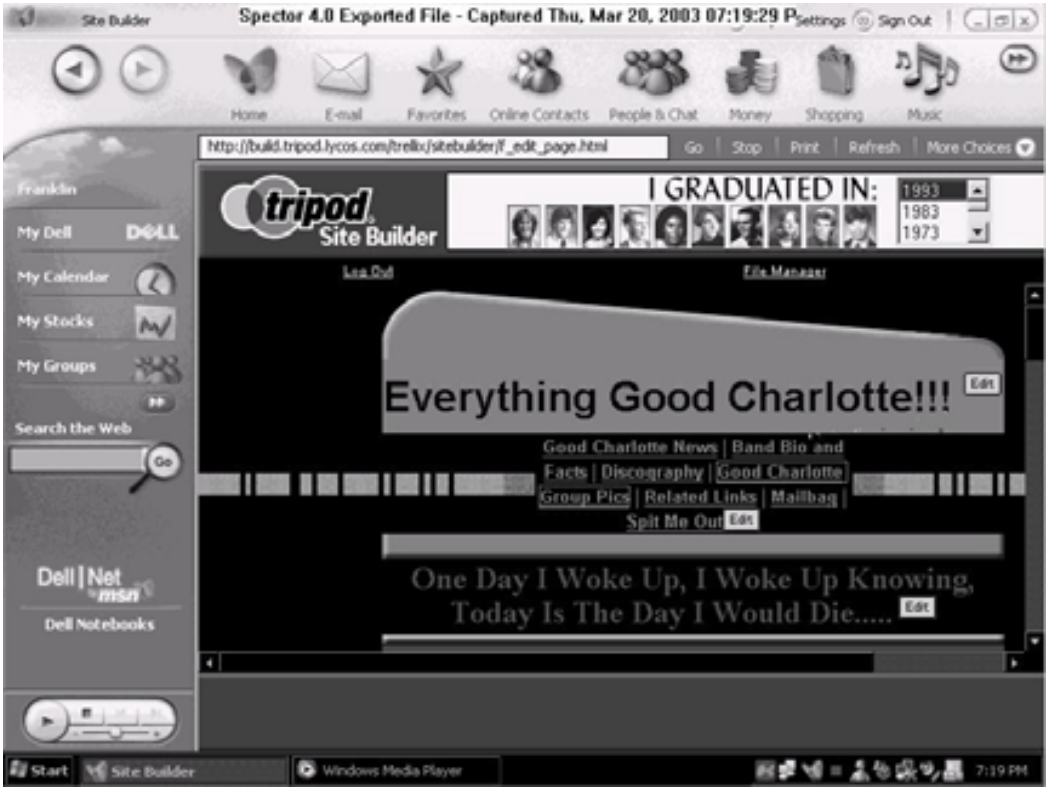

Figure 5. Sophia's Good Charlotte website on Tripod.

Sophia named her website 'Everything Good Charlotte', reflecting her comprehensive 'museum' vision of it. During the peak of her website creation, which lasted approximately two weeks, Sophia did an impressive amount of online research. She searched fan websites, music websites (including MTV and VH1), and lyrics websites to collect material. This material included even more images (individual photographs of band members, group photographs of the band, and graphic images created for or about the band) and written text (biographies, interviews, and other pertinent information about the band). In all, Sophia collected between 500 and 600 pictures of the band. During this process, Sophia appeared to have an innate sense about which information she could trust as reliable, and what information she should discount. She continued to organize the pictures she transferred into the folders on her hard drive (using Windows XP).

Sophia often (re)produced the written texts she gathered in her research much as she (re)produced images. For example, she aesthetically transformed the text she gathered in Word documents, changing the font, size, and color in ways that were pleasing to her. She would then upload texts she had saved in folders on her hard drive to the site itself. Sophia made relatively few material changes to the text; rather, her aesthetic and communicative work primarily involved quickly assessing the value of the text and then arranging it with other elements on her website. For instance, Sophia found an online interview about the band, skimmed the interview, quickly deemed it worthy of inclusion on her site, copied it to a Word document, then pasted it into the site just as she did the band's photos, without having thoroughly read it (in a traditional notion of 'reading' as interpreting the entire text). Three weeks later, Sophia conducted the same procedure for the band's 'thanks'. (Each of the band's members had written a brief 'thank-you' to friends, family, fans, and coworkers, which were included on the CD jacket of their album. These were also included on their official fan website.) When the task was accomplished, Sophia had spent less time reading the 'thanks' than she had on formatting them to appear on her site.

However, in other instances, Sophia wrote about the band in ways that involved more design, creating much of the text herself based upon information she gathered from various online resources. Although we are focusing upon imaging and aesthetics, the following interview segment is suggestive about how writing was produced by Sophia in the service of a larger design project, or an aesthetic of comprehensiveness:

> *Sophia*: Yep, I did. I wrote all the band members' bios by myself because I could not find them on the Internet. I mean, I was looking on the Internet for like a biography, not like name, date of birth ... favorites, dislikes, I wanted it to be like a paper, you know? That kind of thing, like a narrative, and I couldn't find anything, but I found like lots of information and like facts and stuff about their earlier life, and I kinda, I know a lot about them, you know, even now that I'm buildin' this website, I'm like the Good Charlotte expert, you know?
> *Amy*: Yeah.
> *Sophia*: And so I was just like, 'Why don't I write it myself?' So I wrote it on Word, I saved 'em all, then I just copied it and put it on my website. (Interview, 9 April 2003)

Sophia's discussion of creating the band members' biographies ('bios') is noteworthy from a literacy perspective as a possible instance of bridging between her school literacy practices and self-selected practices at home (Schultz, 2002). This bridging is especially suggestive in Sophia's use of the academic terms 'narrative' and 'paper'. For our present purposes, more important was how Sophia's decision to write the bios rather than gather them from elsewhere had little to do with a sense of authorship of isolated texts (that is, she was not particularly attached to the style of the bio texts as capturing her 'voice' or being identified as her 'own words'), and more with Sophia's communicative and aesthetic goals for the project as a whole. The bio texts filled a gap in a larger plan for the website, which she had sketched out on a piece of notebook paper and which included, 'the video downloads, audio downloads, discography, CD thanks, CD reviews, you know, stuff like that' (Interview, 9 April 2003). In the midst of materially producing and distributing images and texts designed by others, foregrounding her authoring work as a (comprehensive) transformer and assembler of diverse texts, Sophia is also actively providing a discourse and design for particular pieces of her project, even as she participates in the discourse and design of 'Good Charlotte' fandom. This example illustrates, from the perspective of the strada, how production and distribution practices open up moments of discourse and design contribution. Not only do remixing and distribution involve elements of active agency in production, but they may also lead to more explicit practices of discourse and design in the service of expanding projects.

Although Sophia anticipated finishing the website within a couple of weeks, working every spare minute, she never did finish it. By May, she had lost interest and stopped working on it. One of the reasons she abandoned the project was that uploading pictures to her website took too much time; she was often kicked off the computer after something had been uploading for several minutes to an hour or longer. The time for uploading pictures onto the server broke her rhythm of work ('I have everything uploaded, because that takes a while, you know, and it's kind of boring. And all you do is just upload and you wait' [Interview, June 3]). A larger break in rhythm occurred when Sophia had filled up her Tripod server space and had to wait for an indefinite period of time while the server automatically compressed her files. For $5.99 a month, Sophia could have expanded from 20MB of space to 30MB, yet she chose not to pay this amount (and very possibly could not have afforded to pay it). Sophia seemed quite motivated to move on to another tool when other tools were not ready to hand or had their own problems. Additionally, and importantly for this analysis, when Sophia adopted the website that became 'Everything Good Charlotte' she also adopted her friend's initial decision to build it on Tripod. It was not possible (at least, so it appeared) to move the site design to another location of production. In other terms, since she could not move the design elsewhere, Tripod collapsed for Sophia the activities of design, production, and distribution. The Good Charlotte website came to her before she began her work on it as not only an initial aesthetic design and product, but also as a particular tool or means of production.

Sophia was critical of the practical and the aesthetic limitations of Tripod:

> They gave me like this much web space [holding her fingers close together] and like you can't do anything. You don't have any layout options. Like our title *has* to go here, and your subtitle *has* to go here, you know, so. (Interview, 10 June 2003)

She had well-defined opinions about other website building programs she had used as well, including Geocities and Angelfire. Sophia was more impressed with the abilities of Angelfire, but found it hard to use. In particular, Sophia found it confusing and difficult, as Angelfire would not let her see her work as she progressed:

> *Sophia*: So like I've already picked a color scheme for like the title, I'll be like, oh does that work? I couldn't look to see it. I have to wait and do everything and then save it and then see it. And it's just kind of hard to use. But I mean like if you can get it to work then it works fine. (Interview, 10 June 2003)

Sophia was not yet skilled and materially equipped enough to build the site with more 'raw' tools of production (such as a purchased site-building program, or html coding itself), nor did she yet have the resources to use a 'savvier', more advanced system.

Sophia's eventual truncation of the project resonates with similar findings elsewhere, of how youth will immerse themselves in digital projects that they leave unfinished without mourning the outcome (Sefton-Green & Buckingham, 1998; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003). Additionally, Sophia's frustrations with Tripod and her lack of material and information access to other tools index the ways in which imaging practices, like other literacy practices, are constructed through complex relations of literacy to technology (Kinzer & Leander, 2003). The data showed that, as Sophia was developing her imaging practices, she was also developing personal evaluative stances regarding the aesthetic and practical limitations of particular technologies. By extension, the possibilities of personal and affinity group aesthetics, as practices of self- and group identity, are tied up with diverse forms of access to and aesthetic and pragmatic stances toward particular technologies.

Although Sophia stopped building 'Everything Good Charlotte', she continued to frequent other Good Charlotte sites, sites that she found graphically impressive, and compared them to her own imagined and actual site-in-production. Eventually Sophia began devoting more of her time to participating in Good Charlotte chatrooms, and individually instant-messaging the people she met in those chatrooms.

Image knowledge as social capital. In one conversation observed in a chatroom for fans of Good Charlotte, Sophia met 'BabySprout' (BS). As soon as BS joined the conversation, she expressed a need for help. Another member, 'T-Ron', asked what she needed help with, and BS confirmed that she needed help with her site. Sophia immediately offered help ('I'll help'). Another member in the chat, 'Trish', encouraged BS to let 'Terri' (one of Sophia's aliases) help, noting that Terri had made something 'cool' for her website's front page. Following this confirmation, BS and Sophia began to chat, Sophia writing out step-by-step instructions on how to create a photo album. Throughout the discussion, other people interjected unrelated comments. Sophia replied to a few of them, but kept instructing BS. 'Trinna', one of the other participants, remarked that she had a question regarding her MSN group; she couldn't figure out how to add more to her page. Sophia began instructing Trinna, as well, commenting in the end 'i should have my own lil help column lmao' ('laughing my ass off').

While the example above does not index a completely 'successful' help session, it does suggest a number of ways in which creating images and image collection are a central topic of communication and a social practice related to familiar technologies and ways of speaking. BS's request for help is not socially marked as unusual, but rather is greeted with an immediate question (T-Ron), a recommendation about a person to help (Trish), and an offer of help (Terri). Sophia's use of language in the instant messaging instructions ('go to your albums', 'scroll down', 'click on add photos') indicates a fairly high level of assumptions about using a common technology and even a common way of speaking about it. Moreover, as a social practice, the opening episode of the communication suggests how knowledge about image manipulation is socially valued. Trish's social recommendation of Sophia as a successful helper is in some ways mirrored by Sophia's own positive self-assessment: 'i should have my own lil help column lmao'. Sophia's assertion of this identity is also evident in her willingness to keep helping, even when BS is prepared to give up. Imaging knowledge, in other terms, as it was shared in chat on the list and in separate instant messaging sessions, carried social capital with it. The social sharing and social capital of image production may be related to how image design, production, and distribution has a social grammar

that is less well-developed and shared than communication in other media (e.g. writing), and the related problem that image technologies are less transparent and commonly understood. It is still more clear from the data that, in the ongoing imaging of Sophia (and Brian), embodied image knowledge carried social capital because images themselves, in their cycles of (re)production, were valued, traded, enjoyed, and admired.

Brian

Designing characters. In playing an online game, Jedi Knights II (JK2) (LucasArts, 2002), Brian routinely changed character 'skins' (the appearances of the character available as image files), in particular during what seemed to be important transitions (such as when beginning a new fight with another character). He did have favorite skins, however, and often represented his character with a dark green and black cloak that he had transformed, with different shades of green and black and enhanced details, from a design sent to him by another gamer. The larger social process indexes something of the way in which social value was assigned to the skin. After he had completed the skin, Brian sent it to the leader of the gaming 'clan' he belonged to at that point, who considered it for approval and later posted it to the website associated with the game so that others could see it and, if desired, download it. Brian expressed how he valued downloading a 'bunch of skins' so that players 'could be seen how they wanted to be seen'; that is, if they failed to download the skins, players would be seen by others as more generic character types. Thus, as a social practice, the use of skins was somewhat complex in terms of recognition, in that even if one went to great pains to create a skin, this skin would not be seen by others who had not downloaded it. Thus, for a skin artist like Brian, the task was not only to create the image, but also to put a way of seeing the image – a 'translator', if you will – into circulation. Moreover, Brian's selections of social groups within the game was guided in part by the extent of their involvement in skin creation and circulation; he was much more drawn to groups or 'clans' active in this form of activity than to those who relied on generic, unmodified skins. Thus, his social identity as a game player was not simply tied up with a particular aesthetic look, but with particular ongoing social practices of imaging: a dynamic ethic of producing, sharing, and transforming images.

Four months later, to begin his play of Star Wars Galaxies (LucasArts & Sony Online Entertainment, 2003), Brian needed to construct his virtual character for the game. This construction of a virtual self-text is perhaps the most obvious relation of co-constructing a text and an identity in his game-play. Narrating his decision-making to the researcher (Kevin), Brian commented, 'Right now I gotta select which person I want to be. One of these guys. They look pretty cool. Look at these guys!' (Transcript, 27 June 2003). His first task was to select the species and gender of his character from a list of eight species options (including 'Human', 'Wookie' and 'Zabrak') and two gender options (female and male). Brian selected the species 'Twi'lek', who look much like humans but have two large cone-like structures growing out of the back of their heads and trailing to their shoulders ('prehensile appendages, known as "lekku"'). Brian had seen the Twi'lek before in other game-play and in Star Wars films. To help him make his selection of species, a window of information regarding each one popped up on the right-hand side of the screen as Brian clicked on images of the characters representing each species. However, Brian read this material quickly and incompletely in the case of the Twi'lek, and scanned one or two other windows of information on other species. An item of linguistically presented information that seemed to help guide his choice was that 'it said these guys were fast and agile and stuff'. For the most part, however, the linguistic text in the right-hand screen seemed primarily to 'illustrate' the image that Brian had selected, confirming a selection he had made based upon the particular 'look' of the character.

Brian's construction of his Twi'lek character proceeded quickly, taking several minutes. A tension that Brian had to deal with in his character image-crafting was that he needed a character in order to begin game-play, and, as he was impatient to experience what 'this thing [the game] can do', he made relatively quick decisions. At the same time, Brian made many adjustments to the virtual body of his character, shaping the images in nearly every way presented to him by the game menus as he proceeded stepwise in the character creation sequence, making adjustments to the body shape, then to the eye color and shape, the nose shape ('length', 'width', and 'protrusion') and

face shape, and then to the skin color and markings on the lekku (Figure 6). In the case of changing the shape and size of the body (i.e. the chest) or body parts (such as the nose), Brian's process involved adjusting a slider bar within a window for each given part. Brian moved these bars left and right to instantly see their effects on the character image in front of him, and then would rest the slider at a point he was satisfied with. In the case of colors, including eye color, Brian chose from a palette of 28 available colors, again trying out several possibilities in the character image (such as red eyes) before settling on a color (in this case, green eyes).

Figure 6. Brian's construction of a virtual character for *Star Wars Galaxies*.
Courtesy of Lucasarts, a division of Lucasfilm Entertainment Co. Ltd.

Decision options were hierarchically arrayed by the program and offered in sequence. Depending upon the scale of the change he was making at any particular point (i.e. involving the entire body or just a part), the view of the central character under design would pull back or zoom in for a close-up view. After he had shaped the body of his character, Brian had to select a profession for the character from six possible starting professions (Artisan, Brawler, Entertainer, Marksman, Medic, and Scout). Six clothed versions of his Twi'lek, corresponding to professions, posed before him during this selection process, and as he clicked on the profession names in the window to the right, the character with the associated appearance moved to the front of the screen. During this entire selection sequence, the character also made slight movements and posturings, the largest of which was to sway and swing his head so as to adjust the cone-like structures behind it (much as one might adjust long hair). Thus, Brian's imaging practices in character creation were not Frankenstein-like, in which a patchwork of decisions was brought to life. Rather, they involved modifications or personalizations of a character which already appeared to be alive within the game world. After just a bit of reading and repeatedly pulling the different options into view, Brian chose to have his Twi'lek be a 'Brawler'. From the perspective of modalities, it is interesting to note that the character was given a name (and surname) by the game in a name-generator window once Brian had completed all of his image decisions. However, one could run the name selection tool

many times, which Brian did until he was happy with his character's name (which we have called 'Tiumbe'). The visual design of character appearance did not end with the original character creation sequence, but continued in this game largely through Brian's selection of clothing and armor (discussed below in relation to image trading).

Approximately one and a half years after starting to play Star Wars Galaxies, Brian became involved in the development of an online game with a group of several online friends. A brief example suggests the development of Brian's imaging practices toward design work, from his earlier modifications of gaming skins and game characters. The team leader of the game development project was a friend who Brian had met four years earlier while playing Runescape, an early (and, in Brian's mind, aesthetically simplistic) online game with a large following. Of particular interest in this example is that Brian began to share files back and forth with another youth, based overseas, who was developing image textures, while Brian's task was to use these textures to render 3-D images, and later, 3-D animations. In the following interview excerpt, Brian discusses the process and refers to an image of a human (avatar) head, which he had marked up with red arrows to discuss detailed problems in design with his overseas collaborator (Figure 7):

> Brian: Yeah see well the texture guy, he would send me a texture and I would be like – and I would be like, well look, this nose you put in shows up right here, and that doesn't look right. And he was like, okay I'll get rid of that. And so he'd get rid of that nose shape and then it will look better. And then see, like these lines right here, it's because I didn't make the bitmap like big enough. But see like from this make up or whatever, it stretches all the way to the side of the head. And see we're just fixing it up as we go ... faces are the hardest – I mean humans, human models and faces are the hardest thing to model. Like I could probably do 10 structures in the time it takes me to do one human.

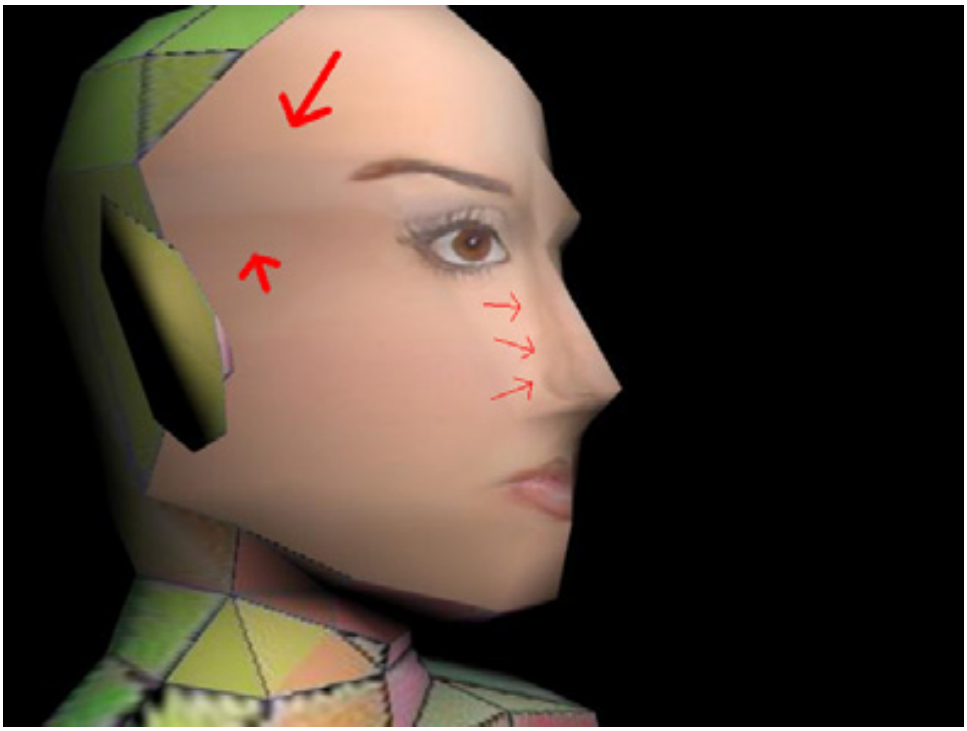

Figure 7. Brian's draft of an avatar head with mark-ups.

This 3-D image in process (Figure 7), produced with Photoshop, 3-D Studio Max, collaborators in two countries, and a background of gaming experience that shaped its discourse and design, illustrates how Brian's imaging expertise advanced and became less directly connected to pre-

established designs. At the same time, it illustrates how Brian's concern for aesthetic quality expanded to include not only an immediate identification with his own game characters, but the quality of an entire world of images.

Decorating a virtual house. After a month of playing Star Wars Galaxies (LucasArts & Sony Online Entertainment, 2003), Brian had purchased a (digital) house in this game from a friend. Houses in this game seemed to have certain kinds of practical value (e.g. for meeting people and storing objects), but for Brian the house had a large amount of symbolic value regarding his status in the game, as purchasing it required a large number of credits (economic capital), which were translated into symbolic capital for Brian. He often noted, for instance, the size of other gamers' digital homes and equated the size with their history in the game and level of expertise. The interior space of the house also appeared to carry symbolic value, not only for Brian but also for other players. Houses in the game were typically not locked (although they could be), but rather left open for the viewing of others.

In this episode, Brian decorated a large central room in his house, which appeared to be a formal meeting room, using weapons he had collected from playing the game. The circular, pillared meeting room was carpeted with a textured crimson carpet, and had red-toned wallpaper and a central white floor space on which were placed four modern high-backed chairs with a small, glass-topped circular table in the middle. The walls in the room were primarily undecorated, with the exception of one rifle that Brian had already placed on the back wall in an earlier episode. We consider this episode as an important instance, not just of decorating a digital space, but of doing so as a particular production of social identity in the game. Although the house was somewhat different from the other houses around it (there were several different models in the game), Brian's personalization of it, with weapons as decor, invoked a particular kind of fighting, knight-like, aristocratic persona and Brian's unique use of it.

Two practical judgments guided Brian's selection of weapons for decoration. First, and most generally, removing the weapons from his inventory would permit him extra inventory space for other objects. Secondly, he deliberately chose weapons that he thought were not the most useful in his arsenal. At the same time, Brian worked with aesthetic goals; he chose weapons that would be 'cool' as decor. The most obvious working toward aesthetic goals was in Brian's arrangement of the weapons as an array upon the back wall of the meeting room. Placing the objects on the virtual wall of the his virtual room took Brian more time than it would have for him to place them on the material wall of his material home (although attaching them took less). Once he had selected the objects, Brian uses a long series of commands to move the objects in space (e.g. 'move forward', 'rotate left'). Placing one of the earliest objects (a 'CDEF Rifle') took approximately two minutes; some later objects took substantially longer, as Brian needed to attend to their spatial relation to one another (Figure 8).

Although the gaming software afforded Brian particular abilities and resources for decorating with images (such as the abundance of material, and high-definition color and detail), this game world also had certain constraints that Brian needed to work around. For instance, knowing the precise location of the background wall in relation to the foregrounded object appeared difficult; Brian's command for an object to 'move forward' was often responded to with 'This is not a valid location', indicating that, in moving forward, the object would be moving *into* a wall or other object. Another constraint of the game was that there did not seem to be any easy way to raise an object off the floor when it was removed from one's inventory. Brian overcame this constraint by moving the object forward until it reached the staircase of his digital home, at which point it was raised up in elevation, and Brian could move it forward in elevated space toward the wall, a trick Brian had learned from communicating with another player.

Brian appeared very patient in moving the objects to decorate the wall, despite these constraints and despite the challenges of the space in which he was working, including the way in which columns obstructed the back wall of the room from easy access. Brian's initial arrangement built upon the base of the single rifle on the wall, adding a second rifle, a large suit of armor between them, and two pistols beneath these rifles. While the rifles faced symmetrically inward toward the armor, the pistols faced symmetrically outward. While working, Brian, as Tiumbe, would often take up one or two different positions in the room to get a perspective on the wall arrangement from different angles. To this central arrangement, Brian added another rifle on the

far left, and another large pistol (a carbine) on the far right. He then took time out from this task to place a carbine on the wall above one of the couches in the same room, and a rifle above one of the display cabinets (which held two small pistols, in separate sections, and books). Brian then left the room for a ten-minute interlude, going downstairs into a smaller room in his house. During this time, Brian crafted fireworks, using a constantly available 'crafting station' in the game (an item of 'hypermedia'; Bolter & Grusin, 1999). Brian's point in crafting the fireworks was both practical (for use later, and also to earn points toward becoming more skilled as an 'artisan' in the game's skill categories) and aesthetic. Aesthetically, he enjoyed how the fireworks (red rockets of different sizes) looked in the room.

Figure 8. Brian, as Tiumbe, inspecting a wall he is decorating in his virtual house.
Courtesy of Lucasarts, a division of Lucasfilm Entertainment Co. Ltd.

Brian continued his decoration of the meeting room by adding more weapons to the wall, including a 'Jawa Ion Rifle' placed above the head of the suit of armor, and two 'Reinforced Combat Staffs' placed symmetrically, like framing devices, in front of two pillars to the left and right of the central weapon collection. In the midst of this activity, Brian reported a bug in the game to the developers using the online bug reporting feature (discussed below). After decorating the wall and downstairs room for approximately 45 minutes in real time, Brian (as Tiumbe) sat down in a chair in the middle of the meeting room to consider his creation from that perspective. He returned to the task and added two more pistols to the wall, with difficulty in getting them placed just right. In all, Brian spent 50 minutes of focused concentration in this home decorating session.

At the close of this session, Brian commented to the observer (Kevin) that another player, whom he often traded with and purchased things from, had a fish on the wall of his house, which Brian though was particularly 'cool'. He noted that some day he would like to get a fishing pole and go fishing in the game in order to be able to decorate in a similar fashion. Once again, as with the weapons, Brian's comment indicated a fluid movement between the use value of objects

(weapons, fish) and their aesthetic, symbolic value. Translations between these forms of valuing are further taken up in the discussion.

Maintenance of the imagescape. Even highly sophisticated imagescapes, such as those of Star Wars Galaxies, constantly confront players with gaps and glitches: breaks in the transparent immediacy (Bolter & Grusin, 1999) of experience. A social practice that Brian regularly took on in his gaming involved interpreting these problems and communicating them to the game developers via a special tool for bug reporting. In choosing to report a bug, the player interrupts the flow of the game which he or she believes is already interrupted by the bug and overlays it with a screen that provides menus to select from, including the severity and type of bug ('crash, gameplay, sound, art, hardware, other'). Brian's bug reporting activity nearly always involved some problem of aesthetics in the game, something that did not appear as it should. Toward the end of the weapon-placing episode described in the previous section, Brian stopped his play to write the bug report below. Brian was frustrated at this point about not being able to pick up a drinking glass that had fallen from the round table in his courtyard room:

> i drop small items in my house, they go directly to the floor and i cannot pick them up, this is annoying because i need some of these items and they also make my floor look bad. i'm on the subject, i personally cannot select the green curved couches or some other items (for example i have to click on the very base of a sofa chair to sit in it).
>
> thanks.

Although Brian labeled his bug as having to do with 'gameplay', his bug report indicates that his goals are directed to both play ('i need some of these items') and to the aesthetic quality of the imagescape, in particular his home space ('they make my floor look bad'). Likewise, we might assume that not being able to sit on the 'green curved couches' is not merely a practical problem (given the limited practical value of sitting to a game character) but is also a matter of taste; a desire to compose an image of one's character sitting on a green curved couch. While our data do not record an instance of Brian having direct communication back from the developers regarding the bugs he reported, he appeared to have a belief that the developers were attending to the bugs as reported and that the reports would therefore lead to the game's development. In this sense, then, Brian assumed a position not only as a player but also as a co-developer of the game, or at least an assistant to the developers. In taking this position, he was trading authority and knowledge gained in play for a more aesthetically pleasing (transparent, immediate) imagescape and a better functioning game. Brian's bug reporting is the use of a traditional literacy practice (writing a business letter of complaint) that is transformed as social practice in a number of ways, including its goal of improving the experience for oneself and others, and its focus upon problems with the aesthetics of this individual and shared experience.

Discussion and Conclusions

In the study of digital literacy practices, more attention has been paid to the critical, information, and design aspects of communication than to their aesthetic and affective aspects, even though cultural and social theorists (e.g. Featherstone, 1995) have emphasized the aestheticization of everyday life. In this article, we have argued that in order to understand how online imaging practices are tied up with social practices of identity, we must seriously engage the immersive, aesthetic qualities of imaging, or in Lash's (Lash, 1988) terms, confront the dominant discursive signification of literacy studies with figural signification. We must stop thinking word/symbol and experience the image/icon.

Below, we consider how image aesthetics might function as a nexus for the social and the personal in practices of identity, reflecting back on the cases of Sophia and Brian. We first reflect on the strada of image production as a personalization of the social that is saturated with engagement, pleasure, and aesthetic valuing. We are interested, then, in remixing – including cropping, tweaking, writing over, resizing, organizing, and coloring images – not merely to describe local, parochial practices of production, but to think about how local and global connects of subjectivity and identity are shaped through such practices. Secondly, we extend our consideration of the data

to discuss image distribution, reversing the relation of the personal and social somewhat to describe how the personal/aesthetic enters into circulation as the social/aesthetic. The strada or practices of production and distribution (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001), we argue, are particularly valuable for conceiving of resources and practices of identity as personal and social hybrids. The packaging and assemblage of identity materials and technologies present an issue for further research and methodology.

Production (Remixing) as Aesthetic Personalization

While it may be more common to think of remixing from a culturalist perspective, or to focus on how the content of resources and materials used do not originate with the individual reconfiguring them, in the cases of Sophia and Brian we have also attempted to draw out how such practices are highly imbued with personal meaning, emotions, and aesthetic determinations. In Sophia's computer wallpapers and website of punk band member photographs, and in Brian's gaming skin creation and decoration of his online house, we see a great attention to detail, sustained engagement, valuing and critique of one's own and others' work, and an effort to create a personal style from widely distributed resources. Although it is difficult to argue for figural relations through a semiotic infused with discursive signification, the nature of Sophia and Brian's activity appears to be just as concerned, if not more so, with creating aesthetic affects as it does with communicating any particular information. As they reconfigure, rearrange, and juxtapose resources discursively shaped and designed elsewhere (by photographers and fans of Good Charlotte, or by Sony Corporation in the case of Star Wars Galaxies), these materials of the social and cultural worlds are laminated, as a source of the self, with the personal and psychological through aesthetic attachment. The practice of identity is thus not only associated with meaning, but also with sensation and style through making the image one's own.

Distribution (Re-coding) as Mobilizing the Aesthetic Affinity Space

When Sophia works on the production of the Good Charlotte website, or when Brian submits a bug report on the aesthetics of the game world, they are entering into a hybrid of the producer and consumer roles of cultural production In Pearce (2002), the game designer Will Wright mentions Ken Perlin's use of the word 'conducer' to describe how consumption and production divides are breaking down in the video game world. Along with this hybridization, we would also like to posit the hybridization of the personal with the social and cultural in the distribution of (re-coded) texts. The particular look and feel of Brian's gaming skins, or Sophia's remixed images, are not only associated with communicative decisions, but also with aesthetic attachments that circulate outward, into affinity spaces (Gee, 2004) where aesthetic values are sensed, negotiated, and celebrated. In this context, note that Brian's selection of social groups within his gaming practice was guided in part by how much particular gaming clans were involved in the creation of gaming skins (as well as game maps, or landscapes), in contrast to those clans that settled for the more generic look provided in the game world as an up-front commercial product. Thus, aesthetic, sensory activity recruits social participation and social identification, just as participation in such affinity spaces promotes further aesthetic activity. In this sense, the personal attachment to the image becomes laminated with social affiliation.

The distribution of aesthetic identity resources is also evident, perhaps more directly, through the ways in which social capital is associated with knowledge about image production and circulation. This type of knowledge and its value for social capital is indexed in Sophia's online help session, and in Brian's posting of his gaming skin to a discussion forum for evaluation and critique. Over the course of two and a half years, when he began to work on the production of an online game, we saw imaging knowledge become even more important to Brian, and to his assessment of the value of others with whom he was collaborating. By contrast, neither Sophia nor Brian experienced school as a place where aesthetic practices and knowledge about images were valued. Rather, the aesthetic/informational or discursive/figural separation is a fairly accurate description of the divide between their digital literacy practices at home and their school practices.

Technology and Packaging the Aesthetic

Finally, our analyses in this article could be readily critiqued as being too human-centered, or as not giving technology its due as an actor in social practice (Latour, 1987). Indeed, Sophia's experiences with the website building service Tripod and the description of Brian's creation of his avatar Tiumbe (in Star Wars Galaxies) suggest how discourses, designs, productions and distributions are pre-packaged by corporations, and how particular constraints, including server space, computing power, and the learning curve necessary for advanced image work are all present in imaging work as a socio-technical practice. In this regard, we clearly are in need of further analyses of how social, technical, and cultural assemblages are formed as products for identity work in online environments, products that not only code identity in the discursive content that they contain (such as images of Star Wars characters) but also, more implicitly, in the range of resources and choices they include for identity work. From one perspective, the menus and slider bars built into the Star Wars Galaxies program for character creation involve an enormous range of possibilities for visual production, while from another perspective, they involve mere adjustments to a pre-given cast of characters, coded with a particular game aesthetic. In ongoing research on literacy and identity, it seems important to attend to the cultural production of aesthetics – and therefore of desire – as involving technology, and its more or less transparent workings.

Yet while we attend to cultural packaging of identity kits through media and technology, these data illustrates how individuals assume agency in novel ways. These forms of positioning cannot be predicted by technologies and their design or constraints alone. An example of this principle is Brian's decorating of his virtual house with unused virtual weapons. It is doubtful that the game designers originally had in mind such decorating, and Brian often seemed to struggle with using the controls of the game to achieve the aesthetic affects he was after. Yet, through his attachment to a particular style, in part informed by the game yet in part constrained by it, Brian remixed the weapons wall and distributed it into the game world as a circulating resource of identity. Thus, while considering the manufacture of desire and identity by cultural and economic entities such as game developers, producers of youth websites and forums, Internet service providers and media outlets, we should also keep an eye on the desire to remanufacture desire and subjectivity by individuals.

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