

Book Review

Dezuanni, Michael (2020). *Peer Pedagogies on Digital Platforms: Learning With Minecraft Let's Play Videos*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. (224 pp., paperback \$35.00; ebook \$25.99)

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As digital platforms create new opportunities for learning, communication centers continue to explore leveraging these contexts to reach clients in new and more meaningful ways. In *Peer Pedagogies on Digital Platforms: Learning With Minecraft Let's Play Videos*, Michael Dezuanni traces how a popular children's entertainment genre enculturates young viewers to a new pedagogical paradigm. Part of the "Learning in Large-Scale Environments" series from MIT Press, Dezuanni's text focuses on Let's Play videos on YouTube that feature family-friendly entertainers playing—and offering instructional commentary on—the popular game Minecraft. A "sandbox" game in a nearly infinite landscape composed of blocks, Minecraft is particularly conducive to peer instruction given the variety of play activities, from building and mining resources to exploring and battling. Let's Players create videos of themselves playing the game, which are often accompanied by narration that provides instruction on how to construct new buildings, travel through the game environment, or complete other in-game tasks. Drawing on the field of informal and connected learning to analyze the pedagogical relationships that are central to the Let's Play genre, Dezuanni's argument is that the appearance of authenticity and approachability, which he calls

"peeriness," accounts for the popularity and educational impact of these videos. The value of Dezuanni's study for communication centers lies in its refreshing theorization of peer-based instruction, its analysis of effective digital learning, and its insights into the learning paradigms familiar to many of our future clients.

The heart of Dezuanni's book is his theorization of the term "peer pedagogies," which attends to the "relationships in which a flat structure emerges between 'teachers' and 'learners,' arranged through a producer's attempts to reduce social distance and their ability to meet a viewer's need for knowledge" (p. 49). For Dezuanni, the popularity and the pedagogical efficacy of Let's Play videos rest on the perception of peeriness between the content creators (as teachers) and the viewers (as students). Structurally, the book consists of two halves: first four chapters discuss the origins and conceptual foundations of digital peer pedagogies, while chapters 5-10 present case studies of *Let's Play* YouTube accounts and Dezuanni's conclusions. The early chapters of the book develop a theory of peer pedagogies to illuminate how the appeal of such nonhierarchical relationships leads to users' engagement with digital literacy practices as both Minecraft players and Let's Play viewers. Further, Dezuanni shows how interest-based

peer pedagogies can reshape users' relationships to knowledge.

The latter chapters present case studies of popular Minecraft Let's Play creators. Dezuanni looks at three specific Let's Players accounts through the lens of peer pedagogy to explore how these creators cultivate peerness and articulate their own relationship with (and their role in facilitating) learning. The social platform—YouTube—allows Let's Players to reach an enormous audience asynchronously, yet intimately. Digital peer learning is facilitated by the audience's perception of interaction, in the form of YouTube comments and fan-produced content, and the creators' performative authenticity and accessibility, which can involve a range of activities from acknowledging fans by name to revealing information about their personal lives. These chapters present a rigorous textual analysis of these popular player accounts, and, while it is unlikely that communication centers can leverage the *celebrity* that make these Let's Players appealing, Dezuanni's central finding from these case studies may be relevant. Each of these three Let's Players appeals to viewers by cultivating a persona invested in social good beyond the game-world.

In his conclusion, Dezuanni argues that peer pedagogies be leveraged toward media literacy education in light of abiding concerns regarding misinformation and data privacy. Indeed, Dezuanni suggests that a significant portion of Let's Play content is doing media literacy work, by engaging viewers to think critically about both Minecraft and YouTube, which hosts the videos. However, a broader view of the book's implications, particularly for higher education, might be found in the idea of the "post-digital" which has emerged in recent years

(Reid, 2019). The post-digital is a loosely theorized concept suggesting that certain aspects of our digital lives have become the default. For example, Bjørn Nansen (2020) discusses the "post-digital playground" in which digital technologies are ambient, or seamlessly integrated, into the physical play space. Given the popularity of Let's Play videos, perhaps educators should begin thinking about how digital peer pedagogies are an increasingly important, if not paradigmatic, reference point for the educational experiences of children (as well as teens and college students), to be emulated even in physical classrooms.

Although Michael Dezuanni's research focuses on childhood learning, it carries profound implications for the work of communication centers today. The book should appeal to scholars and administrators of communication centers, particularly those invested in the relationship between the centers and social media. As a recent special section of *Communication Center Journal* attests, social media raises the possibility of expanding the reach of communication centers and offering opportunities for professional development as well (Morris et al., 2019). Yet, most of the scholarship on communication centers focuses on how to use social media to augment the work of the center. Dezuanni's study presents the opportunity to think through how learning on digital platforms can inform tutoring practices. As Dezuanni writes, the term "digital platform" is a metaphor that invokes both a technological basis and "a range of social, cultural, and economic practices" (p. 3). Perhaps we should begin considering not only how communication centers can *use* digital platforms, but also how to design centers as multimodal "platforms" to appeal to new, born-digital clients.

While the notion of peer learning will also be familiar to scholars and administrators of communication centers, readers of Dezuanni's text will be introduced to a richly theorized notion of "peeriness." That is, rather than merely having characteristics or experiences in common ("peer" as a synonym for "undergraduate," for example), Let's Play "peer" relationships are grounded in the active cultivation of "friendship, trust, and emotional investment" (p. 60). These ideas might serve as a useful framework for additional emphasis in tutor-training programs on cultivating longer-term tutoring relationships, increasing tutor visibility on campus, or even exploring the potential of tutors as content-creators on social media. Additionally, the learning relationships Dezuanni identifies emerge from communities based on shared interests and passions. While tutors are often constrained by the types of content their clients have been assigned, the peer tutoring context may benefit from an increased emphasis on identifying shared motivations for learning or mutual goals for both the tutor and the client, such as enacting social good beyond the educational environment.

Ultimately, Dezuanni's argument provides a vision for the learning experiences that are most appealing to a younger generation of learners and the techniques that their peer "educators" use to promote engagement. The children watching Let's Play videos on YouTube today will soon be arriving in our communication centers as clients and tutors, bringing with them these new digital paradigms for peer-based learning. Therefore, stakeholders in communication centers would do well to consult Dezuanni's book to better understand these future students and how to facilitate their growth as learners and as social beings.

References

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