
Digital Literacies for the Disengaged: Creating After School Contexts to Support Boys' Game-Based Literacy Skills

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Abstract

According to mainstream media, the United States is in a modern day literacy crisis thanks to new digital technologies such as videogames. Boys from marginalized populations bear the brunt of this as they consistently under-perform in literacy related courses [8, 14] and score substantially lower than girls on basic literacy assessments, yet make up the majority of videogame consumers [5]. This workshop will address the issues and successes associated with our after school program for adolescent boys identified as "at risk" and failing in literacy related classes. Our goal has been to explore ways that we might build on kids' existing interests in games in order to engage them in practices that not only align well with schools but are also meaningful in the everyday offline lives of children at this stage of development.

Keywords

Digital technologies, videogames, literacy, at-risk

ACM Classification Keywords

K.3.1 [Computers and uses in education]: collaborative learning; K.3.2 [Computer and Information Science Education]: curriculum, literacy

Introduction

According to mainstream media, the United States is in a modern day literacy crisis thanks to new digital technologies such as videogames. Survey experts report that videogames are now “the fourth most dominant medium, displacing print media” [12]. News reports quote researchers as stating, “students will be doing more and more bad things if they are *playing games* and not doing other things like *reading aloud* (italics added)” [27]. Meanwhile, the National Endowment for the Arts [2] bemoans the huge cultural transformation of “our society’s massive shift toward electronic media” (video games given as the quintessential example) that purportedly “make fewer demands on their audiences, ... require no more than passive participation, ... [and] foster shorter attention spans” than do print media. Yet, all the while, videogaming is only becoming more ubiquitous in contemporary American youth culture, with more than eight out of every ten kids in America having a video-game console in the home, over half having two or more [13], and their popularity with children and young adults only continuing to increase [9].

Boys suffer the worst of it. Boys consistently underperform in and opt out of literacy related courses [8, 14] and score substantially lower than girls on basic literacy assessments such as the NAEP test [11] yet make up the majority of videogame consumers[5]. As Conlin [4] from *Business Week* writes,

Once a boy makes it to freshman year of high school, he’s at greater risk of falling even further behind in grades, extracurricular activities, and advanced placement. Not even science and math remain his bastions. And while the girls are busy working on sweeping the honor roll at graduation, a boy is more likely to be bulking up in the weight room to enhance his steroid-fed Adonis complex, [or] playing Grand Theft Auto: Vice City on his PlayStation2.

Are videogames the culprit? Sax [15] and others argue unequivocally, yes: “The more time your child spends playing video games, the less likely he is to do well in school” (p. 63). Yet, recent studies of what gamers actually *do* when they play videogames indicate that the cognitive work they sometimes require is both intellectually sophisticated and well aligned with schools (at least, good schools): collaborative problem-solving [18, 21], systemic thinking [17], informal scientific reasoning [26], computational literacy [23], and – yes – literacy practices [7, 22, 24, 25]. So why, then, aren’t adolescent boys doing well in school as a result?

The problem, of course, is access – not just access to games but access both to the specific game-related *practices* most efficacious for literacy and to the game based *communities* that underwrite and sustain them. Games can function as a powerful platform for the development of valued dispositions and skills, but in order for them to do so the right social structures and activities must be in place. In the context of online games such as *World of Warcraft* or *Lineage II*, such communities of practice [10] frequently develop as a natural part of gameplay; like most communities, however, access and membership for any one person is certainly not guaranteed – especially for those who do not already exhibit the requisite and valued intellectual abilities, attitudes, and skills. How can we leverage young men’s existing interest in games to strengthen (rather than replace) their engagement in literacy both in school and beyond?

For the last six months, we have conducted an after school online gaming club for adolescent boys identified as “at risk” and failing in literacy related classes. Our goal has been to explore ways that we might build on kids’ existing interests in games in order to engage them in practices that not only align well with schools but are also meaningful in the everyday offline lives of children at this stage of development. Using the

popular, off the shelf online game *World of Warcraft*, we have designed activities to foster those literacy skills documented in previous research as a natural part of advanced gameplay: argumentative writing on game related discussion forums, narrative writing in the form of public character profiles and fan fiction, reading and writing expository text (e.g. in the form of online user created reference manuals, and authoring multimodal texts such as fan websites, comics, and digital movies. Participants (12) and staff (5) game together on a regular, near-daily basis and meet in person on campus each month to engage in semi-structured activities designed to foster digital literacies. In our view, our designed community functions as an *incubator* of sorts, providing a context that can cultivate and expand the burgeoning intellectual dispositions and skills of a population that has been increasingly dismissed as unruly, recalcitrant, and, as Sax [15] states, “adrift.”

In this workshop presentation, we first review the games based research that motivates our work with this population and then discuss the structure and format our after school program. Discussion will also include an overview of how the program functions dually as both a context for informal, interest driven [1] learning and as research lab for longitudinal study of both individual and group change in key content knowledge, practices, and dispositions using case study [19], microgenetic [16], and discourse analysis [6] methods. Central research questions include: What literacy practices grow out of students’ initial interests and dispositions and what do these trajectories of development look like? In what ways can we improve student performance on more recognizably school affiliated tasks by engaging them in similar practices in the context of online gameplay? Can we, in any way, increase participants’ self-efficacy and affiliation toward school?

Using video recordings, observational field notes, individual and group interviews, and student artifacts, we argue for the potential of such programs for the

revitalization of literacy (albeit digital) for the chronically disengaged. While previous games and learning research has empirically documented the forms of literacy that emerge in games in natural contexts, no work to date has investigated how such practices develop over time from inception to apex or how we might design bridging third places [20] between school/work and play that leverage online games. We know that some adolescent boys engage in literacy practices as part of their online gameplay, but we do not know yet whether or how to help them succeed in school as a result. The goal of this project is, in part, to find out.

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