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Source: *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (September 2010), pp. 61-63

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the International Reading Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20749077>

Accessed: 11-07-2015 15:40 UTC

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# Digital Literacies

## Video Games and Digital Literacies

Constance Steinkuehler

Based on their somewhat unsavory appearance at times, video games have an unfortunate reputation with many parents and teachers despite a growing body of scholarly work in literacy studies investigating their merits (Gee, 2007). The *Reading at Risk* report (Bradshaw & Nichols, 2004) and other such documents position games and books in diametric opposition to each other, with games presumed to be one of the causes of a decrease in students' reading despite evidence that problematizes (if not contradicts) such claims.

Today's youths are situated in a complex information ecology within which video games are only one small, albeit important, part. From this view, video games could no more replace books than television could replace radio; rather, each digital medium settles into its own ecological niche and, as a part of that niche, its own complex relationship with every other medium. So what, then, is this relationship between video games and literacy, print or otherwise?

### Two Perspectives on Games and Literacy

At the most basic level, video game play itself is a form of digital literacy practice. If we define digital literacy as it is framed by O'Brien and Scharber (2008), then game play might readily be considered one particularly good case in point. Gaming is the production of meaning within the semiotic resources of the game (Gee, 2007). Gaming is a narrative, hewn out of the "verbs" made available within a game design. Unlike television, books, or any other media that came before them, video games are about a back and forth between reading the game's meanings and writing back into them. In effect, games are narrative spaces that the player inscribes with his or her own intent. From a more contemporary vantage point on literacy, then, games are digital literacy practice through and through (Steinkuehler, 2006, 2008).

There is, however, a second important sense in which games and literacy are related. If we widen our focus from the "individual player + technology" to the online community that emerges around any successful game title, we find that video games lie at the nexus of a complex constellation of literacy practice (Steinkuehler, 2007). Members of fan communities collectively read and write vast cascades of multimodal text as part of their play, from communally authored user manuals to online discussion threads to fansites, fan fiction, and digital fan art (Black & Steinkuehler, 2009). Thus, even with a narrowed definition of what we mean by literacy (i.e., decoding and encoding meaning into quasi-persistent text plus images), we again conclude that video games and literacy actually have

a strong mutual relationship. They are symbiotic, in a close association in which both benefit.

Why, then, is there such immense disconnect between games and classrooms? Parents and teachers typically loathe video gaming and go to great lengths trying to curb it rather than cultivate it. Handheld video game devices are an unwanted sight in school hallways, let alone classrooms. Teenage boys, the most avid consumers of games, do more poorly than girls on basic measures of reading and writing (Lee, Grigg, & Donahue, 2007). So far, we have no evidence that the highly literate lives of “gamers” have any positive effect on their in-school identities and performances. In fact, anecdotally, we have found in our own research that, for some boys in particular, being a gamer works against them in school. To illustrate, I offer the story of a student named Julio (pseudonym) whom I got to know as an informant while engaged in “games-and-guys” research.

### Connecting the Dots

For two years, with the support of the MacArthur foundation, my research team ran an out-of-school casual learning lab program at our university. The goal of our program was not to build curriculum around games per se but to create a quasi-natural lab space in which we could study this disconnect between the in-school versus in-game literacies of teenage boys (and generate ideas for bridging them). Julio joined our program as a seventh grader from a mid-sized industrial town about an hour’s drive from our university. He is from a working class, single-parent, loving family. His mother is ambivalent about video games, but his older brother loves them. Julio identifies as a gamer, loves all things about World War II, and is an avid reader and writer of fan fiction related to both. He has been and continues to be entirely disengaged and failing in English language arts.

Outside of school, Julio avidly reads novels based on video game narratives and even wrote three books of his own around his two interests. His reading and writing gave him authority and social capital in his peer group, where the practices of writing and sharing fan fiction based on each contributor’s specialized game-based interests were overtly encouraged and supported. In fact, Julio’s entire out-of-school

literate life was wholly organized around these interests: He would check facts for his novels using online texts, choose television shows related to his interests, play games related to time periods and narratives he found particularly appealing (e.g., *Call of Duty*), and share these materials and practices with his immediate peers. Julio reads these media as texts that then serve as fodder for his own writing. He writes his friends into his narratives as characters (Newkirk, 2002), including plots that play on inside jokes only members of their peer group understand. Although Julio is the sole author, his writings are a shared experience: “I know they’re going to read it, so I picture what they’re going to be like when they read it, too.” (Julio, 2010, interview)

School for Julio, however, is a very different story. In our two years of study, Julio refused to finish a single reading assigned in class and would often complain about his teachers, his assignments, the classroom, the school, and his entire identity there. Once, when asked about his English teacher, he responded, “She doesn’t like us (he and his friends). She tries to break us like a horse and make us in to, like, the girls.” His distaste for the class only grew over time, with the teacher eventually sending him for special education testing as a punitive measure when she found him increasingly noncompliant and unwilling (interpreted as unable) to engage.

When Julio was in eighth grade, we measured his reading level using the Qualitative Reading Inventory-4 (Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). Julio was reading at only the fifth-grade level, three grades below where he should have been. When we gave him a passage from his social studies textbook selected at his reading level (fifth grade), he performed as predicted. When we gave him a passage from a game-related online manual selected at his reading level, he again performed adequately—no worse, but certainly no better, than he did on the school textbook passage. When we let him choose the specific topic he would read about, however, he selected a grade 12 text and performed at independent level. In other words, when he got to choose what to read, he read four grades above his diagnosed reading level, not three grades below it.

The difference lay in his self-correction rate. When Julio was allowed to self-select a topic, one that he intended to use to improve his subsequent gameplay, he persisted in the face of challenges, struggling through obstacles until he got the meaning. He cared. On the assigned texts, he did not.

### Mistaking "Interest" for "Ability"

It is easy to feel a certain disdain for video games when you consider their violent themes, their scantily clad and ludicrous depictions of women, their scatological humor, and the hypermasculine discourse that surrounds them. But to what extent are we then engaged in a kind of culture war? One could argue that English class has increasingly become a female domain. Video games are, generally speaking, the rough-and-tumble play space of boys and young men (Jenkins, 2006). We judge whether young men like Julio can read and write competently based on their performance on topics we care about. It just so happens that those are not always topics he cares about. The misfortune here is that, at times, we can then end up making claims about Julio's "ability" when what we really have is evidence of Julio's "interests." Thus, we confound our measures of competence with issues of culture or so-called "taste."

Video games are a legitimate medium of expression. They recruit important digital literacy practices. Perhaps best of all, because they are an area of passionate interest for many young men, they are one place where you can see what they are truly capable of.

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