



Enacting Culture in Gaming: A Video Gamer's Literacy Experiences and Practices

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Abstract

This article is a case study of a young adult video gamer and his literacy acquisition in relation to video game play. The author conducted an interview with the gamer and read texts the gamer produced—both creative and personal. The interview and textual analysis revealed evidence that the gamer's literacy practices are influenced by his immersion in the virtual worlds of gaming environments. Additionally, following scholars in New Literacy Studies and video game research, the author demonstrates how his interviewee enacts culture and absorbs literacy practices through socially mediated ways. This ethnographic study suggests ways in which other young adults may carry out literacy practices in our increasingly multimodal contexts inside and outside school.

Keywords: Video games, gamers, New Literacy Studies, literacy acquisition, socio-cultural context, acculturation, young adults

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Many groups inside and outside academia consider *proficiency* to be an important tenet of literacy. The dominant, most sought literacy related to education for the twenty-first century appears to be *technological* literacy. Selfe (1999) argues that educators should not think of technological literacy as simply computer proficiency; instead, we ought to understand “technological literacy as a cultural phenomenon, one that includes cultural dimensions, incorporating what Brian Street (1995) identifies as both literacy ‘events’ and literacy ‘practices’” (p. 11). These events and practices are not experienced in a vacuum devoid of culture, history, or power. Literacy—technological and traditional—is acquired by immersion in a social framework (Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Street, 1984, 1993, and 1995). Likewise, Gee (2003) mentions that “literacy and thinking, are, in reality...primarily social achievements” and not simply “mental achievements” (p. 1), and this article provides evidence of literacy practices and events enacting culture.

In order to test Gee's argument in relation to video games, this article analyzes an interview of Brent O'Malley¹ regarding his background in literacy acquisition and video gaming practices. The interview and analysis demonstrate how social influences contribute to a particular player's literacy practices while engaged in the semiotic systems of video games. Throughout the interview Brent discussed the literacies he compiled from school, home, work, and his leisure activities. The notion that literacies “pile up” comes from Brandt's (1995) work on literacy studies (p. 652). Brent's interview uncovers his literacy practices mediated by culture, specifically, popular culture events and myths. In these settings, Brent learns not only reading and writing skills, but he also absorbs cultural messages that are reinscribed in his own creative work. Although this is an ethnographic study of a single gamer, Brent's literacy practices suggest

how others might compile literacies. That is, accumulate skills and critical faculties regarding those skills. He is, then, multimodal; an analysis of his practices as a gamer enables teachers to continue learning about the literacy practices of the growing multimodal twenty-first century citizen/student.

Cultural Work of Video Games

Video games can serve as cultural repositories for a literacy analysis. Brent does not acquire literacies in a vacuum; instead, Brent acquires literacies as both a subject and agent immersed in culture. Culture and the culture's dominant ideologies mediate all forms of production: Education and literacy acquisition are not outside of culture. Video games, like films, are cultural products that enact culture and display values entwined with culture. Therefore, video games do cultural work, and gamers acquire cultural literacy by absorbing video game narratives. Societal characteristics are incorporated into video games much like ideology is carried out in all semiotic systems. For instance, most first-person shooter video games allow the gamer to take on entire armies, huge gangs, and even hordes of zombies by himself.² Such a situation is impossible in reality, but it reflects another male-dominated genre: the American action film, specifically, ones with a single male hero, such as the *Rambo* films, many Arnold Schwarzenegger films, and the *Missing in Action* trilogy. These films appeal to male audiences and reflect the pervasive ideology of individualism that claims an individual is seemingly all powerful and can overcome enormous odds and be victorious.

The individual hero is an American ideology, but it resonates with such archetypal characters from mythology as Ulysses, Hercules, and David. Gamers embody their on-screen avatars and engross themselves in campaigns where they conquer the video game domain with unlimited ammunition and awesome fighting skills. Such a description is not completely accurate

for the entire history of video games, for instance, 1980s video games such as *Frogger* (Activision) and *Donkey Kong* (Nintendo), but those games reflect the myth of the American Dream that claims an individual can persevere regardless of the obstacles: In *Frogger* it is traffic and a fast-moving river, and in *Donkey Kong* it is barrels (among other things) thrown by a huge gorilla that has captured the princess. Whether one sees video games as frivolously passing time or as systems with complex grammars players must decode (Gee, 2003; DeVoss et al., 2004), observers cannot deny that persistent, dedicated playing improves players' gaming abilities. Also, persistent playing (much like persistent consumption of media) allows gamers to absorb the cultural messages of games. This medium is quite popular and deserves scholarly attention.

As cultural products, video games reflect hegemonic values. For instance, living in a capitalist society, we can expect games to reflect values related to acquiring wealth, perseverance, and free markets. Some games have obvious markers of capitalism that encourage exploring the semiotic system of the game. *Sonic and the Secret Rings* and the entire Sonic the Hedgehog series (Sega) has gamers collect shiny gold rings which offer protection when injured (and make a *cha-ching* sound when picked up); Mario in *Super Mario Brothers* (Nintendo) collects coins as he makes his way through his odd pipe world (on his way to save the princess); CJ from *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* (Rockstar), literally, starts with nothing but the shirt on his back, and, through a series of adventures, he acquires money with which he builds a small criminal empire and even owns a large stake in a casino by the end of the game. CJ pulls himself up by his boot straps and lives the American Dream. The other games in the *Grand Theft Auto* series also follow this bootstrap narrative. In the *Hitman* (Edios) series of video games, players trade their labor—being an assassin—for money. This reflects a free market ideology because Hitman claims he kills for money and not political agendas; he is completely for sale. As Hitman

carries out assassinations, he acquires money that he can use to purchase body armor, weapons, and bribes. Even illegal activity follows payment for services in this virtual world.

Even many massively multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPGs) have players refine their skills in order to acquire virtual wealth, thus rewarding hard work with virtual cash. MMORPGs are video games such as *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment), *Ultima Online* (Origin Systems), and *EverQuest* (Sony Online Entertainment) where gamers interact with thousands of players wandering virtual worlds (often fantastic themed worlds) in order to complete tasks that build a character's profile and skill capability. This skills building reflects advancement in capitalist societies. Citizens are supposed to attend school and/or job training in order to *market* themselves and advance in a career. The MMORPGs reflect a skills-building type of career path where the employee enters knowing little about the job but, after years in the position, the employee is supposed to be able to work more efficiently and, perhaps, assume more responsibility in the organization. Players' characters in many virtual worlds can improve their abilities by performing actions and logging on time in these virtual environments. This time spent in the game helps players' characters become stronger, faster, or just more powerful at various actions needed to succeed in the game. Therefore, these video games enact culture by reinforcing the notion that hard work (or just work) allows individuals to succeed.

Video games are complex multimodal texts that both tell stories and invite audience interpretation. Gamers enter virtual worlds with rules that mimic culture and provide entertainment for leisure activities. In literacy studies, prominent scholars see "figured worlds" as collective or intersubjective truths (Holland et al., 1998; Street, 2003). Video games as figured worlds have not been theorized, but they are figured worlds in a broad sense. Gamers enter the figured world of video games and allow their imaginations to position themselves within the

video game structure. Therefore, the gamer *is* Lara Croft or CJ or Mario working through the complex world the game designers created. Although the software controls or, more accurately, enforces game rules that limit player action (Salen & Zimmerman, 2004, p. 122), the video game itself is a cultural product, one allowing gamers to immerse themselves into the narrative/activity of the video game. The lead characters in these video games, controlled by the gamer, have paths to choose and rules to follow, and these rules are accepted by the gamer. That acceptance is part of the gamer's entertainment choice. With the exception of gamers who immediately go into "cheat mode," most gamers want the challenge of obstacles. Without obstacles, games would not be much fun.

Because video games embed gamers into the virtual digital world much as a film embeds viewers into the filmic narrative, they should be recognized as having a narrative feel. The video games tell stories, and the many cut scenes reinforce a narrative quality. Gamers often must work through the narrative to advance in a game: Successive levels unlock secrets or offer more information to the audience. Furthermore, we can think of video game levels as "chapters." Video games also have characters, plots, settings, and other attributes (i.e., irony, action, and resolution) that mimic novels and stories. As Gee (2003) notes,

People who play, review, and discuss such games, as well as those who design and produce them, shape the external design grammar of the semiotic domain of first-person shooter games through their ongoing social interactions. It is their ongoing social interactions that determine the principles and patterns through which people in the domains can recognize and judge thinking, talking, reading, writing, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing characteristic of people who are in the affinity group associated with first person shooter games (p. 32).

The group associated with these first-person shooters is a group enacting culture, specifically, a culture inundated with media narratives partially focused on terrorism, disasters, rampages, and combat. In turn, Hollywood and the gaming industry keep recreating those violent narratives.

Video games reinscribe the violence enacted in society at large, violence that existed long before video games were invented. This observation complicates studies that claim video games lead to violence (c.f. Anderson et al., 2003; Bushman & Anderson, 2001; Fischer, Kastenmüller, & Greitemeyer, 2010; Gentile et al., 2004), but other scholars in social science fields call into question the causation of violent video games leading to acts of violence in real life (c.f. Block & Crain, 2007; Ferguson, 2007; Kutner & Olson, 2008; Olson et al., 2007). An obvious example of video games reflecting an already violent culture is the number of video games with war themes. Video games like several in the *Call of Duty* (Activision) series are set during World War II, thus, allowing gamers to enter the virtual worlds of the European and Pacific theaters in the early 1940s. However, war is not the only reflection of violence in society: Urban gangs, drug cartels, disgruntled spouses/family members, and rampaging shooters enact violence in society. Video games reflect this violence, but they are not the genesis of violence. Kutner and Olson (2008) claim that suggesting video games lead to violence in real life has been “drawn from bad or irrelevant research, muddleheaded thinking and unfounded, simplistic news reports” (p. 8). News media representations of violence, which can hype situations, also provide viewers the *infotainment* of real life violence.

Consuming cultural products enacts culture, so the consumer is enmeshed in an ideological framework much greater than video games themselves. Therefore, violent video game narratives are cultural reflections and not autochthonous creations of video game

developers. But not all scholars agree that video games are narratives. Because video games require gamers to interact with the “fixed” game environment, Klevjer (2002) believes such an activity “signifies the general principle of having to work with the materiality of a text, the *need* to participate in the construction of its material structure” (p. 192, emphasis mine). According to Klevjer, such an activity is different from “narrative discourse, where the user is invited only to engage in the semantics of the text. . . . In narrative discourse the user is only a reader, not a co-creator, not a player” (p. 192). Several European gaming theorists see games as *ludology* (Frasca, 1999; Juul, 2000; Juul, 2005), which views “games as something unique” (Juul, 2005, p. 15). Juul (2005) contends that “ludology has often been perceived as focused on distancing itself from narratology, and as trying to carve out video game studies as a separate academic field” (p.16). Regardless of whether one believes games are narrative or not narrative, we do not need to have a purely narrative definition to define video games as texts. We may still “read” the semiotics of video games and, contrary to Klevjer’s argument, readers will construct meaning based on their understanding of cultural motifs.

Video game spaces enact culture, and Brent’s literacy activities, including his (re)presentation of ideology in his work, represent the sociality of literacy. Brent is not just playing a game to pass the time or indulge in an entertaining activity. He is performing and, simultaneously, absorbing socially constructed ideologies. The video game environment is a cultural product that carries values, which, gamers, in turn, reproduce as Brent shows in the following abridged literacy narrative.

Brent O’Malley’s Abridged Literacy Narrative

At the time of his interview, Brent, a male in his early 20s, lived in a medium-sized Southern city. He was born and raised in a rural community south of the city. Brent was the

Computer Support technician for the English Department at Granville University, a public university on an urban campus. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Computer Information Systems. At the time of the interview, he was enrolled in graduate-level creative writing seminars at the university, and, since then, he has received an MFA in creative writing at a different university. Throughout Brent's life his parents stressed the importance of education. The O'Malley parents also brought Brent to the library often when he was younger and got him a library card while he was in elementary school. Brent's parents encouraged him to read all kinds of texts—"magazines, books, comics, and encyclopedias." Brent's early life was full of traditional literacy practices, and his parents were his main literacy role models. His mother and father were (and still are) avid readers. Brent remembers seeing his parents reading more than watching TV when he was younger and he, too, is an avid fiction reader. Brent also likes magazines that cover popular culture from a male's perspective—*GQ*, *Details*, *Esquire*, *Maxim*, *FHM*, etc.—because they are not "serious." Even when they do deal with a serious issue (such as terrorism), they have a humorous slant to their coverage. He also claims that is why he enjoys humorous online satire (e.g., *The Onion*). Because of Brent's busy job and class schedule, he does not have as much time to read novels for pleasure, but he does read his classmates' works in his creative writing seminars.

Brent explains that the majority of his reading is devoted to his job. He reads Internet forums where computer professionals go to ask about complex software and hardware issues. In these forums experts look for advice on technological business solutions (e.g. should they implement a particular program for their organizations) and not for consumer solutions (e.g., what should I do if I get an error message?). Additionally, Brent reads online articles that review software and hardware; these articles are more technical than those in *PC Magazine* or *Computer*

Shopper Magazine. Brent says the forums and articles he reads “are not aiming for a mass distribution. They’re for tech junkies.” Because of his interest in keeping current with computer technology, Brent is well informed about the state of computers today, and he knows where to find information on all kinds of products available. His ability to read specifications and descriptions in a specialized field in order to make informed decisions for his employer is a crucial literacy practice for the twenty-first-century IT professional. Additionally, these sources help in Brent’s own personal technology choices—Brent builds his own computers.

Brent’s résumé demonstrates his computer skills for his employer. In addition to his extensive computer skills and duties in his previous jobs, Brent lists many computer skills in the following “Miscellaneous” section of his resume:

- Possess experience setting up Windows 95, 98, NT, 2000, XP, UNIX/Linux and Netware 5/6 networks as well as installing, configuring and securing FTP servers. Extensive exposure to the ADS and NDS trees, including creating groups and users within the tree.
- Served on [his undergraduate university]’s laptop committee to study the feasibility of moving to a “Wireless University.”
- Actual Microsoft Visual Basic, Access and Project experience.
- Designed web pages with HTML and FrontPage.
- Working knowledge of Norton’s Ghost imaging software.
- Set up a five-computer network at home with Internet connection sharing.
- Received expert certification from Microsoft Office training course.

The above are just the *miscellaneous* technological literacies Brent has, and they alone identify him as an expert in Information Technology. Brent says that he had no formal computer

instruction before his first job as an entry-level technician and data entry specialist during college, but he managed to catch on quickly to the demands of his job and learned valuable skills upon which he would later build. Brent describes his way of learning technology as a “hands on” approach: He is more comfortable diving into a technology and discovering how it works as opposed to being taught by a manual or by having directives given over his shoulder.

Brent got most of his instruction in computer technology (mostly in gaming) at home until entering college. Brent was fortunate to have been exposed to computer technology at a young age. His rural school system made computers available to his elementary school in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In fact, Brent remembers being on a computer as early as first grade. Brent claims to have used every gaming system available in the United States since the original Atari console came out:

My family, my roommates, or I have owned one of the following: Atari, ColecoVision, Nintendo, Sega, Super Nintendo, Sega Genesis, PlayStation, Nintendo 64, PlayStation 2, the Xbox, and the Game Cube. I might even be forgetting a few. I can’t remember all the handheld games like the Nintendo GameBoy I’ve played.

Brent’s introduction to the Internet changed his gaming habits. Whether Brent was on his computer or on his roommates’ gaming consoles, he has preferences as to the genres he most enjoys playing—first-person shooters and adventure games. Brent became a big fan of first-person shooters his while in college. He describes how he and his friends bonded over the very popular game *DOOM* (Activision):

I met most of [my gaming friends] in college by walking down the hall and going into their rooms to check out the games they were playing. *DOOM* was huge at my college. You could hear people playing up and down the hall. We would play with and against

each other over the net. Sometimes we would play all night and then sleep through class the next day.

Brent rejects the myth that gamers are alienated adolescents and young adults who just hang out in their parents' basements and play with themselves. He says that he and his friends were very social, and, even though they spent much time playing video games, they still went out to dinner, the movies, and parties together. Brent and five or six other players would get online at the same time and play as a team on a mission. Many of the games he and his friends played from the Tom Clancy genre (e.g. *Rainbow Six* [Red Storm Entertainment] and *Splinter Cell* [Ubisoft]) were about fighting terrorists and rescuing hostages—a common Hollywood film theme. The James Bond video game *GoldenEye 007* (Rare)—based on the film *GoldenEye* (1995)—also follows a similar plot line with James Bond carrying out secret missions in order to rescue hostages, stop terrorists, and save the (virtual) world.

In many of the team oriented first-person shooters, the team members can only carry a limited amount of equipment, so the mission's success is enhanced if Brent's team divides up the tasks. During the game the team members have to communicate with one another. This requires multitasking skills as well as refined kinesthetic motions. Brent and his friends first started shouting commands to each other down the hall: "go right...fall in...shoot...take the hill!" The players would make their characters move by using a joystick, mouse, keyboard, or a combination of the three. Eventually, Brent and his friends were able to type their commands instead of shouting them. Because Brent had to use the mouse, joystick, and keyboard simultaneously, he claims his reflexes improved greatly. Although reflexes are a kinesthetic function and not a literacy skill, the multitasking done in the games is an activity or, more accurately, are a set of activities that reappear in other contexts. During the interview Brent

answered questions, checked his e-mail, instant messaged his friends, and surfed the Internet. The computer environment offered in Windows or Macintosh systems (Brent uses PC platforms) allows users to multitask, and he routinely downloads files, types e-mail messages, and watches videos simultaneously. Operating multiple programs is definitely a literacy most of our twenty-first-century students possess.

Besides trying to understand Brent's gaming practices, the interview discovered *why* he played video games. Brent gave me a few interesting reasons. His main reason was to have a break from reality. Video games are a way for Brent to escape the stress of the "real world" and indulge in the fantasies video games offer. Brent says "I enjoy the cathartic experience of finishing an adventure game much like I do a novel. I really believe it is a similar feeling." Brent's relating gaming to reading a novel shows he equates video gaming to story telling or, more simply, advancing through a narrative. This assumption regarding the narrative of video gaming uncovers a literacy practice parallel with reading in the semiotic system of language (specifically literature). For instance, from reading novels and stories all his life, Brent knows that all stories have plots and take readers through dialogue, scenery, characters, and even sometimes history to get to the end. Video games have many of the same elements. Also, like novel reading, a reader is not just trying to get through to the end—he or she wants to learn something and have an enjoyable experience. Many readers would probably claim that rushing to the end of a novel is a waste of time. Brent feels that way about video games:

Strategy games like *Warcraft* [Blizzard Entertainment] are not just about getting through. They're about mastering the situation. You can get through a game and have nearly no life left and technically solve the puzzle without mastering the game, but that's not as fun

to me. I like to learn all the secrets and truly beat a game. Of course, once I do that, I rarely return to the game.

Although he admits to returning to some games and re-reading certain novels that are his favorites, those occasions are rare (the *Harry Potter* series being an exception). Playing video games is a literacy practice that is informed by our traditional print culture. Brent and his friends are engaged in reading stories similarly to how they read novels, but they do have a different vantage point—they control the protagonists (avatars) in the gaming world.

Brent offers us a chance to see how technology influenced his life—his literacy practices—on a micro level and how certain cultural work gets done in video games—usually in the form of the need for psychological releases—on a macro level. Brent, who is very well educated, astutely reads society into video games; he especially has an interesting view of video games as sites where popular culture is re-encoded for a unique, virtual interactive experience. As we can see from Brent’s literacy history and his video game interests, the idea of a “traditional” text is called into question. A text is not simply a static narrative one reads from beginning to end. A video game is a text that follows genre conventions similar to literature and film. Brent’s case study demonstrates an example of someone using traditional literacy/literary terms to describe the textuality or textual features of the video game medium. The next section discusses how to view video games as cultural products that can be “read” using Street’s (2003) social theory categories for literacy analysis.

Social Contexts of Literacy

Brent’s gaming—his video game play and penchant for certain video game genres—is mediated by culture. While playing video games, which are dynamic semiotic systems that embody ideology, Brent absorbs cultural messages as the game enacts culture. Therefore, Brent’s

literacy acquisition encompasses acculturation as well as skills learning or understanding the game's structure, patterns, or secrets. Although Brent has a penchant for group games where he collaborates with others, many video games hold prototypical American values related to individualism: individual heroes, perseverance, and the myth of the American Dream. Brent shows us that video game politics fits within his literacy practices, which may also be further generalized as his entertainment preferences. There are two important aspects of Brent's gamer identity that make him more than a passive individual who consumes entertainment, a stereotype often projected upon video game fans: 1) Brent's popular culture references inform his creative writing, and 2) his video game activity somewhat mimics his occupational practices.

The games themselves are cultural products produced to fulfill gamer demands. Even though video games have similar print-based attributes, they require us to re-conceptualize the idea of textuality. Video games as texts relate to genre theory (Bakhtin, 1986; Lukács, 1962) and the notion that texts do cultural work—they are products formed by individuals and groups mediated by cultural forces and ideologies. Just as scholars claim that gamers read the “grammar” of a system (Gee, 2003; DeVoss et al., 2004), gamers and critics can read the semiotics of these cultural products. This section discusses video game “texts” through the categories Street (2003) defined in his call for further research into “how literacy relates to more general issues of social theory regarding textuality, figured worlds, identity, and power” (p. 87-88). Identity and power is analyzed in the next section alongside Brent's reinscription of dominant ideology into his own creative work. Brent's interview helps theorize the textuality of video games and enacting culture: His own texts—his creative work—are also mediated by socially constructed narratives.

Because video games are cultural products they adhere to certain conventions. Most notably, for the adventure/strategy games and first-person shooters that Brent enjoys, some American themes arise—the individual hero, colonization/conquest, patriotism, and militarization. Brent’s penchant for first-person shooters suggests that he enjoys embodying the avatar’s persona: As the helicopter “gunner” in *Battlefield Vietnam* (Electronic Arts), Brent is in an Army attack chopper firing on the Vietcong listening to Creedance Clearwater Revival’s “Fortunate Son” and the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction”—two popular songs from the Vietnam Era. Brent was never in Vietnam, but the music and his sense of attacking the VC from a software-engineered helicopter helps him better incorporate the soldier’s persona from representations he has seen in films such as *Platoon* (1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), popular war movies he watches. The video game is a synecdoche of experience and a simulacrum at best. Unlike real war, Brent’s only risk is temporary eye strain and not serious injury or death—he is engaged in a fictional world. Juul (2005) points out that “games project fictional worlds through a variety of different means, but the fictional worlds are imagined by the player, and the player fills in any gaps in the fictional world” (p. 121). What makes the video game a *figured* world is that the world of the helicopter gunner is simulated via the video game’s programming and accepted by gamers who enter the “text” for this virtual experience. Like Brent’s situation above regarding what it *feels* like to be in Vietnam, a gamer’s interpretations come from other sources—culture. Video games (and gamers) are products of the culture(s) from which they come, and we can read the culture—its values, fears, and “history”—in video games.

Video games also represent the figured worlds Holland et al. (1998) describes. As Brent points out, the stereotypical 1980s “computer geek,” a male living in his parents’ basement with no friends, is not the typical gamer anymore. Gamers are rather social. Even at the author’s

university there is a student organization called Gamer's Alliance that consists of gamers who get together to play video games at various times during the semester. Gamer culture is quite prominent and fits the definition of Holland et al.'s figured worlds: "Under the rubric of culturally figured worlds or figured worlds we include all those cultural realms peopled by characters from collective imaginings: academia, the factory, crime, romance, environmentalism, [and] games of Dungeons and Dragons" (p. 51). The last figured worlds mentioned, "games of Dungeons and Dragons," parallels the gaming societies that have sprung up around certain video games. For almost any video game, one can find information on game play strategies, hints, cheats, and discussions about the game. Many of the group members never communicate face to face, but they are a culture with similar interests, linguistic nuances (e.g., emoticons and texting language), and similar experiences.

These members are fans, and a simple online search reveals the ways in which they communicate about games. A study of fandom and fan sites is beyond the scope of this article, but the ease of finding online discussions about games suggests there is an audience wanting both to communicate about and find information on video games. For instance, Natasha Whiteman (2008) observes that fans of video games participate in "the creation of websites, petitions, campaigns, and tirades [that are] left on bulletin board forums and discussion groups" (p. 33). These fans are devoted to games and express their "enthusiasm and excitement surrounding new releases" in online environments with other fans (Whiteman, 2008, p. 33). These fans follow conventions of electronically mediated textual spaces. Whiteman's focus is on fan nostalgia for the video game *Silent Hill* (Konami), but she also reprints excerpts of fan posts that reveal their shared experiences and ways of communicating about the video game. One post she recounts is that of an upset fan who laments "I'm sorry, but SH is SUPPOSED to be in SH"

(p. 41). The poster's use of capitalization to evoke screaming and abbreviations for a commonly known topic abound in text-based online spaces. The poster, a member of the *Silent Hill* (SH) fan gaming subculture, participates through the discourse conventions of online environments.

Even though these fans might never meet each other face to face, they enter the virtual community, the online space, as members of a social unit. By incorporating literacy scholars' theories for analyzing video gaming literacy, this article proposes an expansion of *social* from strictly interpersonal physical connections to include virtual societies as well. For instance, contemporary video games allow gamers to play with others they have never met as well as with friends and acquaintances playing on one system or many like a LAN party (a LAN party is when individuals bring their gaming systems and "hook up" via a router or other network connection in order to play with or against each other). The rules of the games are set, but the gamers interact through their avatars, thus, creating social space. Gamers are not solitary individuals simply interacting with the game's artificial intelligence (AI); instead, they communicate within a community devoted to a particular game. For instance, the community could be vast like the MMORPG *World of Warcraft* (Blizzard Entertainment) or the immersive environment *Second Life* (Linden Research), where tens of thousands of players can potentially play at the same time; on the other hand, the community could be a group of a few acquaintances entering the world of smaller multiplayer games such as *Halo* (Bungie) or *Gears of War* (Epic).

Brent describes his experience as both solitary and social, but he very much enjoys playing with his friends and roommates. Besides Brent's earlier remark about enjoying the commando-squad games that he and his friends from the dorm would play, Brent feels first-person shooters are bonding moments:

First-person-shooters can be very stress relieving. You just pick your weapons and go out and shoot other characters. I really like playing these with my friends. We go out and try to kill each other online, so there's camaraderie of a sort in doing that.

Again, although the figured worlds of video games are manufactured by the game designers, gamers, who may be from any socio-economic status, interact with others (or the game's Artificial Intelligence) through the medium of avatars—characters the gamers embody. Holland et al. (1998) argue “figured worlds rest upon people's abilities to form and be formed in collectively realized ‘as if’ realms” (p. 49). Although Holland et al. (1998) reference non-virtual social realms—social groupings based on profession and gender to name two—gamer culture centers around arbitrary, yet accepted systems of valor that certainly work as “as if” spaces. Gamers “win” by getting the high score, saving the princess, or *eliminating* their competition. Juul (2005) defines a component of gaming, “*valorization of outcome,*” as “the different potential outcomes of the game are assigned different values, some positive and some negative” (p. 36). Compared to Holland et al.'s (1998) further explanation of “figured worlds,” a game is just as legitimate a figured world as non-virtual cultures: “By ‘figured world,’ then, we mean a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others” (p. 52).

Whether it be *The Game of Life* (Milton Bradley) or the games of life, value is assigned based on cultural assumptions. Members of a culture value certain items, ideas, and investments over others. These values need not be universal to be prevailing cultural assumptions. In capitalist society, members value money, success, and advancement in careers. Although one could argue that money is valuable because, in a practical sense, people use money to buy goods

of value, the assumption that society has to believe is that the system of purchasing goods with money is acceptable. Additionally, items purchased as reflections of oneself (sports cars, diamonds, exotic animals, etc.) as opposed to items purchased for sustenance (food, clothing, shelter, etc.) embody culturally defined assumptions. Just as the stock market rises and falls based on the perceived value of companies, members of a culture value items, such as diamonds, based on the perceived social status associated with jewelry. The point of displaying a diamond or driving a sports car is not purely functional or practical. Luxury items convey value because they are perceived as being expensive; in capitalist society, one's being able to afford luxury items points to one's importance through the association of wealth. Games, of course, have points—both numeric and goal-oriented reasons for playing—but, in the case of friends playing against each other, the game outcome may have positive or negative social ramifications (e.g., bragging rights). Regardless of the valor ascribed or assumed in winning a game, the game is a figured world “people have the propensity to be drawn to, recruited for, and formed in these worlds, and to be active in and passionate about them” (Holland et. al., 1998, p. 49). Gamer culture is a serious one to study along with other identities. The figured world of gamer culture has webpages, magazines, blogs, and other media to advertise itself and facilitate dialog. Gamer communication contributes to the culture's maintenance just as Holland et al.'s (1998) figured worlds idea indicates where “people's identities and agency are formed dialectically and dialogically in these ‘as if’ worlds” (p. 49).

The next section covers gamer identity by examining Brent's gamer literacy practices and demonstrating how ideology mediates his creative work.

Identity and Dominant Ideology

A gamer's identity is inextricably intertwined with his or her literacy practices. Brent is a computer expert and gamer: His acquisition of literacy skills—both traditional and technological—has informed his everyday persona. Although this section is limited in what can be generalized to a larger gaming culture, Brent's literacy practices are congruent to his creative self. As a writer and popular culture consumer, Brent's identity is carried out through his reading tastes and, ultimately, through his writing. Unlike the more robust discussions of literacy and identity (Street, 1984, 1993, and 1995; Gee 2003; Holland et. al., 1998), this article offers a site for analyzing one gamer's inculcation of popular culture literacy as garnered through a sample of texts and the gamer's own words.

In a short story Brent wrote, he describes a post-apocalyptic dystopia where citizens are so stressed out they relieve their anxieties through a government program that grants a select group of citizens (through a lottery) the chance to kill another citizen without repercussions. Brent's own gaming has this release feel when he says, "The impetus for me to play a game is to take a break from real life. . . . Many games offer the player a chance to become another persona." Brent goes on to point out that through video games "a player can try out the lifestyle of a SWAT team member, a race car driver, and a soldier. Players want these types of real life games." The *ability* to enact random violence in his short story is a common theme of first-person shooters. Such a philosophy on gaming must, therefore, inform his short story. Additionally, the post-apocalyptic theme is common in science fiction narratives as well and futuristic-themed video games: *Wasteland* (Electronic Arts) and *Fallout* (Interplay) are two notable ones.

Brent's creative vision, however, shows he is a product of his historical moment. Al-Qaeda in Brent's fictional story's future destroyed American cities, thus plunging the United

States into chaos. Brent's use of this particular plot line goes along with what Holland et al. (1998) believe is the social and historical construction of identity, cited at length below:

“Person” and “society” are alike as sites, or moments, of the production and reproduction of social practices. But there is a substantiality to both sites. We object to anti-essentialism that rotely rejects any sense of durability or predisposition in social life. Forms of personhood and forms of society are historical products, intimate and public, that situate the interactivity of social practices. It is in this doubly historical landscape that we place human identities. We take identity to be a central means by which selves, and the sets of actions they organize, form and re-form over personal lifetimes and in the histories of social collective. (p. 270)

Also, Brent's post apocalyptic incorporation characterizes Street's (2003) “ideological model of literacy,” which claims “literacy is a social practice...identity, and being” (p. 77-78). Both Holland et al. and Street identify the social construction of one's literacy as a socio-historical (re)production internalized by an individual. Brent's moment in history is carried out through his creative activities, and his entertainment choices (video games being one choice) reinforce his understanding of his historical context. Our interview in April 2004 was only one year after the United States' invasion of Iraq and a little over two and a half years since 9/11.

The analysis here departs from ideas of power and literacy of literacy/language scholars who note that literacy and opportunity are often related to access and one's social position (Brandt, 2001). For instance, Street (2003) comments on teacher-student relationships as non-neutral hierarchies because “the ways in which teachers or facilitators and their students interact is already a social practice that affects the nature of the literacy being learned and the ideas about literacy held by the participants” (p. 78). Historically, literacy—meaning the dominant culture's

definition of literacy—has been assumed to be a necessary component of success and various socio-economic groups have varying access to literacy. We need only look to the historical case of Frederick Douglass (1845/1995) to see how his contemporary agents of social control—his owners—denied literacy instruction to him and fellow slaves. Brandt (2001) argues that literacy should be “addressed in a civil rights context” (p. 206). In fact, at a luncheon in early 2003 honoring Deborah Brandt winning the very prestigious Grawemeyer Award for her book *Literacy in American Lives*, an elected official from the Kentucky State Legislature pressed her on the issue of literacy as a civil right. He felt it was a bold proposition, which demonstrates that such a concept is quite radical in the public sphere.³ The power differences and relationships regarding literacy and literacy acquisition have been addressed by scholars such as Street and Brandt. This article’s focus on literacy and power is not about Brent’s socio-economic status and his assumed privileged position in the larger culture; instead, it uncovers some interesting examples where Brent enacts culture, specifically, popular culture. The evidence above suggests that he absorbed dominant ideology and narratives, for instance, media headlines about terrorism, and his literacy acquisition follows a socially constructed model. Culture mediates Brent’s literacy activities.

Conclusion

Literacy is not just language but the politics of the language/skills that society uses. Video games are literacy sites that need to be understood beyond problem solving and strategies. What cultural messages might arise and what might they mean for gamers’ other, more traditional literacy practices? Brent’s literacy practices offer readers a way to understand video games as a semiotic system that exists as a mirror to the larger society. Because literacy is tied to the socio-historical moment in which an individual interacts, we can think of cultural literacy as

a component of literacy practices or activities. The ability to read the video game environment—a skill video gamers possess—requires the same amount of attention to details as reading other texts to locate the cultural work being done. Although video gamers may transfer other skills from the semiotic system of the video game to another semiotic system, as Brent shows in his creative writing, gamers' entertainment preferences are supported by an adherence to many cultural myths that pervade popular culture. Brent reminds us that our students will come to us having absorbed culture and ideology across a variety of media and modalities. We ought to be ready to help our students “read” cultural assumptions in media in order to prepare them for literacy in the twenty-first century and to foster critical thinking about cultural myths.

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Endnotes

¹ The interviewee's name and university are pseudonyms. All information about Brent's background and Brent's actual words come from a recorded personal interview on 1 April 2004.

² The male pronoun is used to reinforce that this study is based on a male gamer.

³ The author attended this luncheon.



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