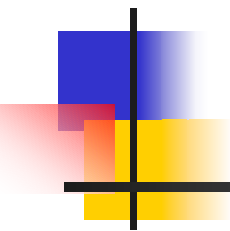



How Early Adolescent Boys Take Up Digital Literacies




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The purpose of this presentation is to discuss how early adolescent boys take up literacy practices, particularly digital literacies, and what they mean to them. I will discuss the boys' engagements and perceptions of the use of digital, video and computer games and how they see these games as a part of their literate world.



The notion of what literacy is has changed over the years as mapped out by Willis (1997). She provides a frame for looking at the shifts from “literacy as skill” and “literacy as school knowledge” to “literacy as a social-cultural construct.” Understanding that literacy is a social, cultural construct means that as the social and cultural contexts change so does what it means to be literate.



This Study

- 25 boys
- 3 1/2 years
- Ethnographic research
- rural and urban
- variety of boys
- minimal ethnic diversity



Why do boys engage in digital literacies?

These boys play their games because they are exciting, challenging, and fun. They can see the results and ultimately be successful. These are important to boys' engagements in literacy (Blair & Sanford, 2004).



Success and social connections

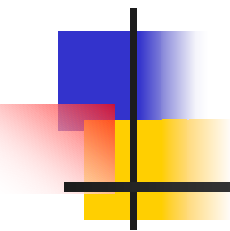
Winning is big and it is within reach for each boy because of the multi levels of the games. The boys feel they can always win at some level or for now. Winning with these games is not always a solitary event, the boys often play together. Games provide a place for social interaction as well as an individual role.




Are all boys gameboys?

Our findings with the boys in general demonstrate most of these boys as being enthusiastically engaged in some gaming activities and many are able to sustain extended periods of time on each game or level of the game.


Types of games




Action/adventure
sports
strategy
RPG (Role play games)
1st and 3rd person shooter
simulations




Our findings support the notion of multi-modal representations and many of these games come in a variety of modes. Many exist as TV shows, videos, hard copy card or figurine games as well as digital games. These games are aware of the different modes and make references to them in their discussions.



Although they are not particularly critical about the multi-modal phenomena they recognize that the game developers are capitalizing on this. One boy said, “Sometimes a new thing will just be in everything. If there’s a really big new computer game or something, then you’ll play it on the computer, you’ll read about it in magazines, you’ll see it on TV. Or like when they World Cup came on, it was in every magazine; they made a new computer game, *FIFA World Cup 2002*; it was pm TV all the time.”




Children interact and connect with various modes of representation (e.g. Print, video, audio, and graphic images) in multi-modal ways: visual and verbal, spoken and written, narrative and display (Kress, 1998).





Laspina (2001) suggests these digital and multi modal texts bring cognitive implications: “The computer has expanded the field of representation for text, the conditions determining the culture and conventions of print, in particular those of textbooks, have changed. And by providing a new medium for textual representation, digital technology may ultimately be reshaping not only our culture but our mode of cognition” (p. 246).


What the boys are getting from their digital practices:

- changing uses of language; facility with oral language to be descriptive, engaging, connected, explanatory, new vocabulary (downloads, cheats, “chatting” RPG, mutating, genres), as well as new semiotic systems (MSN “chatting” symbols, terminology “XP” for experience)

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- awareness of categories/genres; ability to describe the differences between genres: role-play games (RPGs); strategy games; first person shooter; third person shooter; action and adventure; simulation; Arcade; sports; puzzle

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- procedural knowledge, knowing how to proceed through the game, or knowing how to find out
 - willingness to take risks; failure understood in very different terms from that of classroom failures

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- ability to strategize, to attend to multiple tasks simultaneously (“more convenient reading on line because then I can listen to my music at the same time”)
 - thinking in networked ways rather than in linear patterns
 - expectations of engaged, challenging, choice-based education




They are taking the ideas, characters, plots, strategies, actions, and resolutions into their school creative writing and into their understanding of their own lives. Their notebooks and writing files are full of examples of these games morphed into a format that is acceptable to teachers. One boy described how he included a game plot in a fictionalized story when he wrote his provincial literacy achievement test.



He said:

“it was [supposed to be] about an invention to find a new place, and then I was thinking about this game. The game’s called *The Dragon of Doom*, and I was just like, ‘I know what I’ll call my title. I’ll call it *The Doom Dragon*,’ and then I was studying, taking pieces off the game and pieces of what I was thinking of, and I just created this thing. And I wasn’t really exploring anything; I just wanted to have a story.



I started out with this special dragon friend and a few things to find my father. I was thinking that, and I just walked through--found this cave and destroyed the Doom Dragon, and then it's just going on really much about the cave. [laughs] So I don't think I'm going to get good marks on it. [laughs]" (p. 26)




Conceptualizing digital writing

When asked about how a digital game was written one boys said “Basically there’s a 3-D format, and it’s a black screen or sometimes a white screen, and if they were going to make a pen, then they’d have the tip here; they’d put a little dot there, a dot there, a dot there, a dot there and they’d have lines; then they would add texture, colour, etc. until it was a good full image. Basically it’s a lot like that. Sometimes they use 3-D models, add light onto them, and then scan them into the computer, then go from there; add things, take away things, like that.”




Implications


Hey (2001) suggests, “if we were to broaden current definitions of school literacy, we might find that boys’ vernacular literacies are actually serving many boys rather well although the school system is failing to recognize or capitalize on this” (p. 219). If boundaries between texts are becoming blurred, the lines between sanctioned/approved school literacy and out-of-school entertainment literacies are not; clear and rigid boundaries are maintained in school and do not allow for broader conceptions of literacy and texts.



We see the boys teaching themselves to read the new literacies. Hey et al (2001) suggests, “as computer-based reading becomes increasingly important in the home and at work, we need to be developing readers who can select relevant information from a huge body of potentially relevant material. We need readers who can be attentive to and skilled in reading associative patterns and making links. Screen reading brings with it none of the features of closure and then sense of an ending which are classic elements of the study of fiction--the links and associations can go on indefinitely, layered one upon the other” (p. 219).



As literacy researchers thinking about the impact of these changes it is our view that we need to continue to interrogate, as Luke and Elkins (1998) ask, “What will it mean to be a reader and writer in the 21st century?” (p. 4). As literacy educators we need to engage ourselves in these issues and recognize that we are making “the move into the post industrial digital age”. (Laspina, 2001, p. 249)



As literacy researchers, we believe that we need to know more about these games and the gaming practices boys engage in and that we need to begin to understand them from the perspective of the boys. These games represent a significant part of the boys' literate world and have potential to connect at many levels to what they do in our classrooms.