CONNECT!ONS Med!aLit moments

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In This Issue…

Theme: Media Literacy and Video Games

With the advent of each new media technology in the 20th century, from radio to film to television, public discussion has focused on the perils and promise of each. Much the same discussion has been taking place with regard to the relatively young medium of video games. Public debate about them has been highly polarized, and sometimes less than mature. Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the Columbine High School students who murdered 12 students and a teacher in 1999, were avid players of the first-person-shooter game *Doom*, and when their game playing habits came to light, the potential of video games to turn players into sociopaths was debated in the halls of Congress. On the other hand, some of the most popular books on video games, such as Marc Prensky's *Don't Bother Me Mom—I'm Learning!*, Steven Johnson's *Everything Bad Is Good For You*, and James Gee's *What Video Games Have to Teach* argue that video games are revolutionary tools for learning.

What's missing from this debate is a focus on the experiences of game players themselves. Recently a fan of the video game website Penny Arcade sent us a link to a 2010 episode from the site's animated web-tv series "Extra Credits." The topic of the episode was video game addiction, and the script writer for the series, James Portnow, decided to abandon the animated format for a live-action, semi-scripted confession of his own experience with game compulsion during his high school years. At one point, Portnow essentially argues that his compulsion contained the seeds of his recovery. As he moved into his junior year in high school, he stopped playing *Everquest* and began working on college applications: "As fall rolled around, I spent all my *Everquest* hours writing and re-writing my entrance essays. I thought of getting into college as an *EQ* quest. All the skills that I'd thrown at the game, I found that life rewards you for using them. You have to apply them to the right things, and apply them as tenaciously as you did when you were playing." Is this a good example of skills transferred from one task and context to another? There's plenty of room for debate. But clearly he's reflected at length on his experience as a gamer, and identified both benefits and liabilities to playing.

In this expanded issue of *Connections*, we seek to broaden the discourse on video games and gaming culture. Because video games share many characteristics with film, it's easy for commentators to ignore the attributes which make video games unique. Literacy about the medium itself is needed, and we offer an introduction in our first research article. While psychological studies of the effects of video game violence do contribute to our understanding of video games, these essentially treat video games as a content-driven medium as well; so, in our second article, we argue for the importance of discussing students' motivations for play as well as their individual responses to game content.

Our centerpiece resource article for this issue demonstrates how the rules and mechanics of game play work together with game content to represent the world to game players, and we argue that training teachers and students to perform close readings of these persuasive media

“texts” represent a crucial step forward in media literacy education. In our second article, we focus on the book--*Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming*--to underscore how context is vital to media literacy education, as evidenced by the systematic constraints which women face when they attempt to participate in gaming culture and the games industry. We would be remiss to ignore the work available on the potential of games for social and educational change, so we comment on these in our list of references and other resources. And in the MediaLit Moment for this issue, your students will learn how to apply critical thinking skills to the task of designing their own games.

Research Highlights

Video Games 101

What is the unique appeal of video games to players? Is it the immersive quality of game worlds? Is it the sense of participation in a grand narrative larger than oneself? Is it the sense of freedom that comes from the open-ended interactivity of games? In this essay, we focus on the game features, or "ludic" qualities, of video games. In many respects, it's the games in video games which are of greatest interest to parents and educators. Many will ask, why do children spend so much time playing games rather than focusing on homework? Stated most succinctly, games create powerful motivations for mastery. Jane McGonigal, in her 2011 book *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, gives a concise overview of the elements of game design in her opening chapters. Games of any kind are constituted by:

- a goal – the specific outcome which players will work to achieve
- rules – which place limitations on how players can achieve the goal
- a feedback system – which tells players how close they are to achieving the goal
- voluntary participation

The philosopher Bernard Suits once offered this definition of game play: "Playing a game is the voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles" (qtd. in McGonigal, 22).

Playing a game is a voluntary form of work. Usually when we work, we do so to make a living, or to get ahead, or to meet social expectations. There are high stakes consequences for failure at work. McGonigal writes, "When we don't choose hard work for ourselves, it's usually not the right work, at the right time, for the right person. It's not perfectly customized for our strengths, we're not in control of the work flow, we don't have a clear picture of what we're contributing to, and we never see how it all pays off in the end" (29). These are also some of the primary reasons why McGonigal claims that "reality is broken"—the reason why so many people, many of them adults, are choosing the voluntary challenges and positive stress, or *eustress*, of games.

One task at which video games excel is calibrating the difficulty of the work which it assigns to players. As players improve their performance in the game, the game engine works to ensure that winning the game is possible for the player at the same time that it heightens the level of challenge. Not coincidentally, this is one important function of education. Students will eventually become disengaged if they encounter too much or too little challenge.

When the game is optimally calibrated to the their abilities, players may spend many hours in a state of "flow," a term coined by American psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi (pronounced cheek-SENT-me-high) in his 1975 book *Beyond Boredom and Anxiety*. Flow is characterized by a satisfying, exhilarating feeling of creative accomplishment, and produces feelings of intense, optimistic engagement with the world. Csíkszentmihályi's research led

him to argue that flow was most reliably and efficiently produced by the specific combination of self-chosen goals, personally customized obstacles and continuous feedback that make up the essential features of gameplay (McGonigal, 36).

To argue for the benefits of video games, McGonigal also appeals to the intrinsic rewards of game play. Work as employment provides the extrinsic rewards of money, material goods, status, or praise. People can quickly develop a 'tolerance' for extrinsic rewards and desire more of them. Game play promises long-term, pleasurable engagement which delivers intrinsic rewards such as: 1) satisfying work which involves a clear goal and actionable next steps 2) the experience, or hope, of being successful; 3) stronger social connectivity; and 4) a sense of contributing to something larger than oneself. McGonigal makes her best arguments for video game play as intrinsically rewarding through her explication of sample games, and perhaps the most compelling example given is *Super Monkey Ball 2*.

In this bowling-style game, players roll "monkey balls," transparent bowling balls with monkeys inside them, down crooked bowling lanes which are floating in space. When a gutter ball is thrown, the monkey rolls off the edge of the lane and whirls into space. In 2005, the Media, Interface, Network and Design (MIND) Lab in Helsinki, Finland invited 32 test subjects to play the game, collected physiological response data as they played the game, and compared the data against a log of key gameplay events. They found that players exhibited the most potent combination of positive emotions when they made a mistake and sent the monkey ball veering off the side of the lane. Through interviews, the researchers discovered that the animation of the flying monkey had functioned as a reward. It made players laugh. More importantly, it vividly demonstrated the players' ability to effect change within the game (also known as "agency"). The players hadn't failed passively, but spectacularly, and entertainingly. The combination of positive emotion and felt sense of agency made the players eager to try again. If they could send a monkey into outer space, then surely they could knock over a few bowling pins next time.

With motivating inducements such as these, is it any wonder why children and adolescents are attracted to playing video games? We suggest that parents and educators pay close attention to intrinsic rewards when they select games or plan and assign construction activities in the classroom. Intrinsic rewards can support gameplay with content which you may find trivial, or worse yet, offensive. Yet intrinsic rewards can also bring your children or students into a flow state as they play games which support important educational objectives.

Video Game Violence

The troubling possibility that the violence in video games might increase violent behavior among children and adolescents has generated some of the most intense controversy about video games, and the great majority of psychological research on video games has focused on verifying and measuring these effects. In this article, we attempt to weigh the contribution which this research has made to our understanding of video games, and suggest ways in

which parents and teachers can approach such games.

Laboratory studies of the effects of violent video games have demonstrated short-term increases in aggressive thoughts and actions among test subjects. These effects generally persist for no more than a few hours. Many laboratory tests are highly artificial in their design. Does the length of time which a test subject blasts an air horn towards another test subject after playing a violent game really predict the likelihood of violent behavior in the world outside the laboratory? How does this performance "count" as an aggressive act? Furthermore, most subjects are playing the games by themselves, yet current ethnographic studies demonstrate that most game play is not solitary but social.

Of greater value are cross-sectional studies, often conducted in public schools, which use a number of survey and interview methods to investigate the relationships between use of violent games and behavior of students in and out of school. Many do show a significant correlation between playing violent games and aggressive behavior, anti-social behavior and poor academic performance. However, cross-sectional studies only document that students are playing these games and exhibiting these behaviors at the same time. They cannot establish whether video games cause such behaviors. It could be that children who exhibit problem behavior are attracted to them. Yet such studies can yield practical recommendations for further investigation. For example, a survey study of over 1,200 students at two middle schools in Pennsylvania and South Carolina found that most students who played games which had received M ("Mature") ratings tended to play non-violent games as well. The authors suggested that playing M-rated games exclusively could serve as a potential warning sign (Kutner and Olson, *Grand Theft Childhood*).

Studies of game play and subsequent behaviors over a longer period of time (i.e., longitudinal studies) could produce the most authoritative evidence of the effects of violent video games. A current search of academic literature yielded very few studies, with none longer than a year in duration. There is a clear need for development of this sub-field of media effects research.

The entire field of media violence research deserves scrutiny for its assessment of the magnitude of effects. Regression analyses performed in media violence studies often find a 1% to 9% "variance rate" for the aggressive behaviors under study (Kutner and Olson,76). In other words, the violent content contributes up to 9% of the increase of those behaviors documented in the study. Many will use an epidemiological model to affirm the significance of those effects. As Craig Anderson and colleagues write in their 2007 book *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research and Public Policy*, "When the effects accumulate across time, when large portions of the population are exposed to the risk factor, and when the consequences are severe, statistically small effects become much larger in both a statistical and a practical sense" (144).

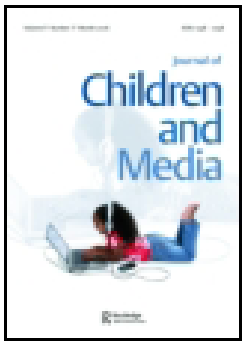
In the epidemiological model, violent media content is treated as a kind of pathogen. Exposure results in relatively low rates of infection (increases in aggressive or violent

behavior), but over time, the absolute number of infected individuals may increase substantially, if not exponentially. By contrast, consider what Kutner and Olson discovered when they surveyed male middle school students about their motivations for gameplay. 62% of boys played violent games "to help me relax," 48% of boys played because "it helps me forget my problems," and 45% because "it helps me get my anger out" (135). One may question whether the boys interviewed successfully managed their feelings of anger and frustration, but they weren't simply exposed to the content. They consciously engaged with it. They were media audiences who responded differently to the same media text. Kutner and Olson's study is also noteworthy for the simple fact that it surveyed students' motivations for gameplay. Most do not.

When Barry Joseph of Global Kids, Inc., a youth development organization in New York, observed one 12-year-old boy playing *Grand Theft Auto*, he was surprised to see that the boy was performing a bizarre subroutine within the game. He played a cabbie who ran over prospective fares, then waited for them to get up again and climb into his cab. As many readers may know, *Grand Theft Auto* is an M-rated game series which has stirred intense controversy for its depiction of violent criminal acts. Joseph asked, "Would you ever get in a taxi that ran you over?" The boy responded, "The A.I. is dumb" ("Why Johnny Can't Fly," 256). One could describe the boy's gameplay as an example of desensitization to the casual violence found within the game. But given his reference to the game engine (the "A.I."), it's likely that he was exploring—and exploiting--the game's mechanics more than anything else. General surveys of video gamers show that the desire to understand the working of game systems is a common motivation for play. It's also a motivation which has little to do with feelings or behaviors identified as pre-cursors to aggression.

All this has implications for practice. The epidemiological model of media effects has more or less been assumed in public debates about violent video games, and that assumption may easily lead parents and teachers to believe that one video game is anti-social and another pro-social, when, in reality, young players may be playing "different" games than adults think they are. We're not arguing that all gameplay is beneficial. Rather, any discussion of violent video games with children and adolescents should focus less on the content of the game and more on their own motivations for playing and their style of play. Let your students know what your values are (and for parents, what games you are willing to buy), but use their experience with the games as a touchstone for reflection, and as a resource for future action. And wherever possible, play games together with them as well.

CML News



Research on CML's *Beyond Blame* curriculum published in Journal of Children and Media

Authors Theresa Webb & Kathryn Martin have published *Evaluation of a US School-Based Media Literacy Violence Prevention Curriculum on Changes in Knowledge and Critical Thinking Among Adolescents* in the September issue of the Journal of Children and Media.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of *Beyond Blame: Challenging Violence in the Media*, at increasing students' knowledge about the effects of media violence and the core concepts of media literacy. During the 2007–2008 academic year, 1,693 sixth–eighth grade students from school districts around southern California participated in the study.

To read this article:
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2012.724591

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About Us…
The Consortium for Media Literacy addresses the role of global media through the advocacy, research and design of media literacy education for youth, educators and parents.

The Consortium focuses on K-12 grade youth and their parents and communities. The research efforts include nutrition and health education, body image/sexuality, safety and responsibility in media by consumers and creators of products. The Consortium is building a body of research, interventions and communication that demonstrate scientifically that media literacy is an effective intervention strategy in addressing critical issues for youth.

www.consortiumformedialiteracy.org

Resources for Media Literacy

How to Analyze a Video Game: A Primer

In the introductory article for this issue, we noted the polarized nature of public discussions of video games. Some claim that violent games produce negative effects in players, while others argue that games will instill players with desirable cognitive skills. In the great majority of cases, commentators describe what they believe are inherent attributes of different game genres or types. Rarely do they make an effort to exhaustively investigate *specific* video games as unique media texts.

Game designer and critic Ian Bogost appears to be one of the first authors to arrive at a systematic method for analyzing individual games which also yields insights into our culture at large. In an essay from Katie Salen's edited volume *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*, Bogost writes: ". . .video games make claims about the world, which players can understand, evaluate and deliberate" ("The Rhetoric of Video Games," 119). In focusing on 'claims about the world,' Bogost could just as readily ask,what kind of world does the game construct? In other words, Bogost is focusing on the issue of representation in much the same way that Len Masterman did in drafting the key concepts of media literacy in *Teaching the Media*.

Bogost makes his contribution to the field of media literacy by arguing that video games make those claims about the world through the game system and its rules. To explain, Bogost borrows from the notion of the "possibility space" as defined by Salen and Eric Zimmerman. In games, the possibility space includes all of the choices made possible by a set of rules. Bogost writes, "In a video game, the possibility space refers to the myriad configurations the player might construct to see the ways the processes inscribed in the game system work. . . we explore the possibility space its rules afford by manipulating the symbolic systems the game provides. The rules do not merely create the experience of play—they also construct the meaning of the game" (121).

While the theory supporting Bogost's method may sound a little daunting, practical application is not beyond the reach of parents, teachers and students. Bogost also outlines concise guidelines for "reading" and "writing" the rhetoric of video games:

- What are the rules of the system?
- What is the significance of those rules (over other rules)?
- What claims about the world do these rules make?
- How do I respond to those claims?

(*Persuasive Games*, 258).

Documentary films are often a good choice for analysis in the media literacy classroom, and a

video game with a more or less explicit message can be a good choice for introducing students to game analysis. An example may be found in one of the more controversial games released in the last decade, *America's Army: Operations*. The game was conceived and openly publicized in 2002 as an Army recruiting and communications tool. It may be easy to dismiss the game as an attempt to make simulated fun of the deadly consequences of war, but it would be even more instructive to analyze the mechanics of the game. *America's Army* differentiates itself from the gameplay typical of commercial squad-based fighting games by adhering strictly to Army rules of engagement. Rather than logging as many kills as possible, players collaborate in short missions with well-defined roles. Players violating the ROE will find themselves in a cell in Fort Leavenworth, accompanied by a mournful harmonica playing the blues. Even use of foul language is grounds for in-game discipline. In the meanwhile, the player's Honor statistic increases at specific point targets. While the point system may seem contrived at first, it bears much in common with the practice of military decoration, and signals both commitment and expertise. The status conferred to the player conveys the message, "It looks like you have the right stuff to join the Army!"

Game analysis may itself be a persuasive act. In her book *Reality Is Broken*, game designer Jane McGonigal argues for the intrinsic rewards of gameplay by conducting an analysis of the first-person-shooter *Halo 3* which challenges typical public views of such games. According to McGonigal, the game environment of *Halo 3* is a vast, interactive space which provokes feelings of curiosity and wonder. The game creates an epic context for action as well. Players are troops in the United Nations Space Command who battle against The Covenant, an alliance of malevolent aliens, and the world created by the game provides a set of many collective stories that connect individual gameplay to a much bigger mission. McGonigal argues that the epic scale of the game inspired collective action in the lead-up to the 10 billion "kills" logged in April 2009. Players shared tips and strategies, and organized round-the-clock cooperative campaign shifts. McGonigal argues that players treated their missions like an urgent duty. One game blog intones, "We know we'll be doing our part. Will you?" (96).

In his essay "Media Literacy 2.0: Unique Characteristics of Video Games," Aaron Delwiche identifies four essential characteristics of video games for teachers and students to consider as they attempt an analysis of a game:

- immersion
- engagement
- identification
- interactivity

Delwiche gives readers instructional scenarios for most of these elements, and some touch on questions which bring the CML framework to mind. What design elements intensify the immersiveness of the game environment, and how do they "construct" the reality of the game world? For the topic of engagement, students work in groups to identify the elements of the game that particularly attract their attention (or fail to do so). For the topic of identification, students are encouraged to ask, what new identities, values, and new ways of being in the

world do they learn as they play particular characters in a game?

Delwiche takes both game theorists and media literacy practitioners to task for failing to produce a comprehensive conceptual framework for video game analysis. Given these contributions by Bogost and Delwiche himself, we believe the CML framework can be readily adapted for game analysis. Re-writing isn't necessary. Re-imagination of context is key, and we look forward to a re-imagination of media literacy practice with video games for decades to come.

Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat and the Gendered Identity of Video Games

Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming provides a ten-year update to the 1998 anthology edited by Henry Jenkins and Justine Cassell, which was the first to examine the barriers girls and women face when they attempt to participate in video game culture and the games industry. What had changed in ten years? According to the introduction, more women were playing video games, but substantial barriers to diversity and equity within the industry remained. According to a 2005 Interactive Game Developers Association (IGDA) survey, women make up 11.5% of the industry workforce, with only 10 to 12% of this group employed in executive or creative roles. They also earn an average of $9,000 less than their male counterparts, even with equivalent tenure in the industry ("Getting Girls into the Game," 164).

As the following chapters reveal, the barriers to participation remain formidable. For example, researchers observed that, in public settings with fewer game machines than people, girls consistently chose to step aside and make room for boys ("Gender Identity," 282). Within massively multi-player games like *Everquest* and *World of Warcraft*—games which attract large numbers of adult female players with their many social features—offensive remarks, constant attempts to discover the "real" sex of players, and verbal harassment are relatively commonplace ("Maps of Digital Desires," 93-94).

The image of the "hard-core" male gamer remains one of the most persistent barriers. Game publishers have not deviated in their pursuit of the single, white male aged 24-34, who is also the assumed customer at retail game counters. Morgan Romine, a community manager for Ubisoft, relates her experience with a retail clerk while pre-ordering a copy of *Halo 2*: "Wait—you're ordering this for yourself?" ("Maps of Digital Desires, 89). By middle school, boys generally log many more hours of gameplay than girls. Digital gaming, in turn, is a glamour industry, where years of gameplay are a prime qualification for entry, and the "passion" expected of employees may translate into a work week over 60 hours, leaving little time to raise a family.

Research on the game play of girls has advanced considerably, and there is hope that evidence from these studies may convince game publishers to change their design and marketing plans. For example, studies show that girls prefer games that support problem-

solving or feature multiple ways to win; narratives about difficult situations relevant to their lives rather than vast, epic struggles; and games that allow them explore identities and relationship ("What Games Made by Girls Can Tell Us," 131). A number of chapters in this volume also describe the efforts of academics to partner with designers to create games which can appeal to girls, develop their sense of self-efficacy, and help them learn programming and other STEM skills.

By the same token, several contributors to this volume warn of the dangers of turning the preferences of girls into hardened, essentializing categories. For example, women seem to have thrived in the "sandbox" environment of the *Sims* series of games--women comprise about half of the players in the series, and many are contributing user-generated content which requires sophisticated graphics and programming skills. Yet it is also tempting for marketers to construct this success as proof that women have a relatively narrow range of preferences. In addition, a number of contributors also point to the likelihood that the industry will misread women's relative lack of exposure to commercial games as a sign of narrowed preferences. As T.L. Taylor observes, "It is too often assumed that women who do not buy computer games or choose particular titles are making an informed decision—that is, a negative decision about a game or a play mechanic—rather than one in which they simply have not had the access to experiment. . ." ("Becoming a Player," 62). Taylor argues that providing opportunities for girls and women to play games (e.g., all-female events at internet cafes, or at retail stores) is one important remedy to the 'ghetto-ization' of women's gaming.

In the research articles for this issue, we argued that examining player motivations is essential to understanding video games. Examining player motivations may be equally essential to the task of persuading publishers to expand rather than constrict the options of female players. For example, in a 6-year survey study of 40,000 players of massively multi-player online games (MMOs), Stanford researcher Nick Yee queried players about their motivations for play, and found that, though differences by gender did emerge, the data showed far more commonalities than differences. The average gender overlap across all listed motivations was 87 percent ("Maps of Digital Desires," 89-90).

In "Are Boy Games Even Necessary?" designer and scholar Nicole Lazzaro takes this argument into the realm of market research. She outlines four "Fun Keys," broad areas of appeal in which the motivations of male and female players largely overlap, and argues that these are far more predictive of appeal to players than demographic segmentation: "There is more going on in best-selling titles than fighting and violence. . . .emotions such as *fiero* (Italian for personal triumph over adversity), curiosity, and relaxation are found in abundance in hit game experiences whether it is a shooter like *Halo* or a match-3 game like *Bejeweled*"(209). According to Lazzaro, if game publishers want to expand their prospects beyond the over-saturated "hard-core" market, they'll need to design games which provide diverse play-style opportunities for all players.

Resources: Video Games

References Cited:

Anderson, Craig A., Douglas A. Gentile and Katherine E. Buckley. *Violent Video Game Effects on Children and Adolescents: Theory, Research and Public Policy.* Cary, NC, U.S.A.: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Bogost, Ian. "The Rhetoric of Video Games." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*. Ed. Katie Salen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. 117-139.
Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007.
Bogost is a sophisticated theorist as well as an experienced game designer. *Persuasive Games* can be difficult reading at times, but Bogost offers many illuminating analyses, with sample games ranging from advergames to commercial best-sellers to educational games.

Delwiche, Aaron. "Media Literacy 2.0: Unique Characteristics of Video Games." *Media Literacy: New Agendas in Communication*. Ed. Kathleen Tyner. New York: Routledge, 2010. 175-191.

Joseph, Barry. "Why Johnny Can't Fly: Treating Games as a Form of Youth Media Within a Youth Development Framework." *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*. Ed. Katie Salen. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008. 253-266.

Kafai, Yasmin B., et al, eds. *Beyond Barbie and Mortal Kombat: New Perspectives on Gender and Gaming.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.

Kutner, Lawrence, and Cheryl Olson. *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008.
Though this book has been conceived in part as a contrarian reply to research linking video game violence to violence among adolescent players, it's still thoroughly informative. The authors, who are both parents and researchers, explain how lay readers can make some basic evaluations of media violence research, then invite readers to evaluate the cross-sectional study they conducted for the book.

McGonigal, Jane. *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World.* New York: The Penguin Press, 2011.
McGonigal's argument for the potential of games to motivate social change may seem a little starry-eyed at times, but her analyses of a wealth of games, especially massively-multi-player alternate reality games, demonstrate how games can function as remarkable tools for marshaling resources and people for common purposes.

Recommended:

Brown, Harry J. *Videogames and Education*. Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2008.
Only in his chapter on "Videogames, History and Education" does Brown hold a sustained discussion of the potential of videogames as a pedagogical tool. But that's hardly a reason to abandon the book. Brown explores a number of topics with regard to video games, from

video games as works of art to video games as ethical "texts." In almost all his chapters, he exhibits analytic precision while remaining largely accessible to non-academic readers.

Carr, Diane, et al., eds. *Computer Games: Text, Narrative and Play*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2006.
Video games are made up of two basic elements: the rules or mechanics of the game, and the narratives which enhance their meaning for players. The editors of this book discuss the more important interactions between just those two elements. Though it's academic in nature, most chapters focus on a single game to illustrate concepts discussed. As a result, the editors are able to offer many accessible and insightful observations about games. The book also offers original ethnographic research on the social aspects of game play.

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
While this book was obliquely criticized in the introduction to this newsletter, Gee is quick to admit that he is only arguing for the implicit learning *potential* of video games. What makes Gee's book stand out from other works in this crowded field is his lucid analysis of the linkages between sociocultural approaches to learning and the learning principles he finds embedded in the games he discusses in each chapter. In doing so, he makes it possible for teachers to gain a broad understanding of the implications of gameplay for classroom practice. That's a worthy accomplishment.

Salen, Katie, ed. *The Ecology of Games: Connecting Youth, Games and Learning*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008.
Individual essays have already been referenced in this newsletter, but taken together, the essays in this anthology represent an important, if not seminal contribution to game studies which should not be missed.

RESOURCES: Organizations

Games are rapidly becoming vehicles for education and social change. Here are a few organizations which may be of interest –

Quest to Learn School www.q2l.org

Quest to Learn is a public charter school in New York City for grades 6-12 which uses the underlying principles of games to create immersive game-like learning experiences. For example, students work in small teams to complete short, opt-in "missions" in different subjects. Completing missions allows students to "level up" to a point of mastery at their own pace. The school's curriculum is interdisciplinary, with a focus on systems learning and thinking. Q2L opened its doors in 2009 after two years of planning by teachers, academics and game designers, and receives funding from the MacArthur Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

Institute of Play www.instituteofplay.org

The Institute of Play, the parent organization of Quest to Learn, is a not-for-profit design studio founded in 2007 by a group of game designers in New York City. The Institute is headed by Katie Salen, a 10-year game design veteran and a pioneer in the movement to apply game

design principles to challenges outside the field of game development. Recent projects include the development and commercial release of Gamestar Mechanic, an online adventure game with a built-in game design curriculum, the opening of a Quest to Learn campus in Chicago, and GlassLab, a learning and assessment lab formed in collaboration with Electronic Arts, ETS, and other partners.

Games for Change www.gamesforchange.org

Founded in 2004, Games for Change facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. Games for Change organizes an annual festival in New York City which brings together leaders from multiple sectors to explore the real-world impacts of digital games, and offers a suite of services to guide organizations and people who are actively pursuing video games to further their mission. Recently, G4C has been commissioned to design games for a global trans-media project based on *Half the Sky*, the best-selling book and PBS mini-series highlighting challenges and opportunities for women around the world.

International Game Developers Association www.igda.org

IGDA is the main industry association. Given its size, it can be a valuable resource for anyone interested in learning more about the industry. IGDA operates an outreach program for high school students, organizes academic events, and offers freely accessible content on a variety of topics. The Special Interest Group in Learning, Education and Games is accessible to the public.

Come Out and Play Festival www.comeoutandplay.org

In *Reality Is Broken*, Jane McGonigal, a designer of many alternate reality games (games which include a live-action element), argues that ARGs have the potential to create new real-world communities. Come Out & Play is an annual festival of street games that turns New York City & San Francisco into a giant playground. The festival also provides a forum for new types of public games by bringing together players eager to interact with the world around them and designers producing innovative new games and experiences.

Med!aLit Moments

DIY Sandbox Game

Video games are one media form which may be difficult for children and adolescents to produce. Many will learn how to use "cheats" or learn how to modify ("mod") a game, but creating a game from scratch requires programming skills which few have at their disposal. However, just as drafting storyboards can help students become reflective producers of comics, film and video, creating initial game designs can help them become reflective producers of video games. In this MediaLit Moment, your students will be able to try their hand at some of the essential tasks involved in games design, and they'll also learn how to recognize the values implicit in their designs.

Have students create a basic design for a "sandbox" video game

AHA!: I'm not just making a world, my design choices also "say" something about my values and point of view!

Key Question #1 for Producers: What am I authoring?
Core Concept #1: All media messages are constructed.

Key Question #4 for Producers: Have I clearly and consistently framed values, lifestyles and points of view in my content?
Core Concept #4: What values, lifestyles and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

Grade Level: 6-12

Materials: Pencils, paper, imagination. Larger sheets of paper if students want to produce sketches of their game worlds.

Activity: Rather than restricting players to singular goals or storylines, "sandbox" games allow large groups of characters to more or less freely explore the environment of the game. *Second Life* and *SimCity* have helped to define the genre, but there are plenty of sandbox games which have been targeted towards children and teens, such as *Club Penguin*, *Whyville*, and *Habbo Hotel*. Begin the activity by asking students what sandbox games they're familiar with, and discussing some of the essential characteristics of these games.

Next, organize students into groups of two or more, and let them know that they'll be creating an initial design for a sandbox game of their choosing. Ask them to come up with a theme for their game. If *SimCity* is 'about' urban planning, what might interest them? Marine conservation? Aviation? Musical theater? If students mention the *Grand Theft Auto* series, you may want to affirm that criminal activity should not be a primary theme of the game.

Students will also need to ask themselves, what are some of the most valuable or important things that player characters can do in this game? Once they've answered that question, they should decide how characters are awarded points or other benefits for experience and/or tasks completed.

Once students have had time for collaboration, ask them to share their design concepts with the rest of the class. This is also the time to ask "Why?" questions. Why this theme? Why were certain roles or professions important? Why did they decide on their particular reward "mechanic" for the game? Direct their attention to Key Question #4 for Producers. How did they frame values through their work?

Extended Activity: Depending on time, grade level or sophistication of your students, ask them to answer a few more questions. Are there any important places within the game? What purposes do they serve? If they're cities or geographical regions, what are the most notable characteristics of the place and the people there? Ask them to create a sketch. Is there some sort of economic system within the world of the game? What goods and services are traded? Again, once they've completed the work, ask questions to call attention to the values, lifestyles and points of view framed within the games.