The Literacy Landscape for Millennial Students

LIGHTS CAMERA LITERACY

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Call for Manuscripts

The editors invite submissions of manuscripts for *The Florida Reading Journal*, the refereed journal of the Florida Reading Association. We invite submissions geared toward improving literacy instruction and innovation at all levels with a firm grounding in current theory and research. Suggested topics include literacy project descriptions, research or theoretical pieces with pedagogical implications, or issue-centered pieces addressing timely literacy topics of local, state or national interest. Preference is given to articles that most directly impact Florida learners. While theoretical and research articles are invited, please keep in mind that this is a journal primarily for FRA members, who are predominantly practicing teachers and literacy specialists. We encourage articles from PK-12 and adult-level practitioners, literacy researchers and doctoral students, as well as articles written by other experts in the field.

The Florida Reading Journal's audience is largely composed of PK-12 practitioners in the state of Florida. The FRJ editors are interested in exploring topics of interest to Florida educators and valuable in their daily literacy practices. We welcome submissions from researchers as well as PK-12 teachers. The thematic calls listed below are not intended to be exhaustive, but merely meant to be helpful to authors as they consider topics for publication. Please review the submission guidelines before submitting a manuscript.

Submission Guidelines are online at: http://www.flreads.org/Publications/quarterly/call.htm

Ongoing Annual Theme: Florida Standards in Action
FRJ has an ongoing interest in submissions related to the implementation of the Language Arts Florida Standards (LAFS) across K-12 classrooms. Manuscripts that highlight how individual teachers have adapted their instruction to integrate the arts, technology, and the content areas are of particular interest. We also have interest in articles that discuss how districts have addressed the challenges and lessons learned related to the implementation of LAFS and the Florida Standards Assessment.

Ongoing Call for Book Reviews
FRJ has an ongoing interest in reviews of professional texts related to teaching and the themed calls for 2015-16. Reviews should be between 750-1000 words and should offer an overview of the book, not a detailed synopsis or an in-depth essay. Examples of published book reviews can be found in previous editions of FRJ.

Publication Themes for 2015-2016

Volume 51, Issue 2: Diverse Teaching for Diverse Populations April 2016
Classroom teachers face daily challenges in instructing and motivating learners with diverse needs, from reluctant readers to students at risk of school failure, as well as those with learning delays and other developmental challenges. We are interested in submissions that explore literacy strategies and approaches to curriculum and teaching to support learning for special populations. We are seeking articles that address innovative ways to teach reading to these learners, including but not limited to students within the autism spectrum, those with ADHD, those with cognitive disabilities, those living in poverty, those learning English as a new language, or others readers struggling academically.
Submission deadline: February 1, 2016

Volume 51, Issue 3: The Flipped Classroom August 2016
Flipped learning has emerged as a unique approach for improving student transfer by moving didactic instruction to the online environment and planning for active learning in the classroom. Thus, the teacher serves in many roles, including subject matter expert, media specialist, and instructional designer. How does this affect reading time in the classroom and the monitoring of student reading progress? We are interested in submissions that explore how flipped learning is accomplished in a literacy classroom. What are the challenges presented to struggling readers in this curricular design and how are those challenges met? Submissions concerning innovations and critiques of the flipped model are also welcomed.
Submission deadline: June 1, 2016

"Mind Craft": Mediating the Literacy Development of an Emergent Reader

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Abstract: This article describes how the game Minecraft mediated the literacy development of an emergent first grade reader. I approached this exploration with the dual identities of a mother and literacy scholar and took a multiple literacies perspective on early literacy development. As a result of this exploration, I argue that games such as Minecraft have the potential to enhance the literacy development of an emergent reader by blurring the lines between in and out of school literacies, building cultural capital that contributes to self-initiated literacy events, and developing digital literacy

"Mommy, when I play Minecraft it feels like I'm growing a second bigger, creativer brain."
Owen, age 6

From the time my son Owen gets off the bus to the time he goes to bed, he wants to do one thing: play Minecraft. When he isn't playing the game, he wants to watch YouTube videos of other gamers playing Minecraft, a "sandbox" video game in which players independently build virtual worlds out of textured cubes, while engaging in exploration, resource gathering, and combat. Owen and I are in a constant struggle over the amount of time he is allowed to engage in Minecraft related activities. As his mother, I worry about the psychological effects of excessive video game usage. In their review of the literature on technology-based problem behaviors, King, Delfabbro, and Griffiths (2012) identified several behavioral effects of problem video game playing, including "disrupted sleep, neglected personal hygiene and household chores, withdrawal from friends and family, and nonattendance at work or school" (p. 47). Research also indicates that massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) lead to a greater risk of excessive involvement among players (Rehbein et al., 2010) than other video games. As a literacy scholar, I worry about the effects of Owen's excessive video game usage on his literacy development. While I have provided a literacy rich home environment (Burningham, 2005), it is of little benefit when he only wants to interact with his electronic tablet.

The situation is further problematized by the fact that my work as a doctoral candidate and university instructor requires me to spend a great deal of time working on my own laptop and iPad. Although I spend more time than most engaged in literacy activities such as reading and writing, my use of technology to engage in these activities for my work makes it more difficult for Owen to recognize the activities I am modeling (Weems & Rogers, 2007). For all he knows, I am playing Minecraft, too.

Minecraft is a game in which users break and place blocks in order to build structures. In the creative mode, users build structures and mine the earth for resources that can be used to create items such as swords. In the survival mode, users must protect themselves from nocturnal monsters using the structures and items they have created. Depending on the platform (i.e., computer, Xbox 360, Playstation 3, or mobile app) users can play in a multiplayer environment and interact within shared worlds.

Although Minecraft has been recognized by some as becoming more popular with children than Angry Birds for entertainment purposes (Hogan, 2013), it is also being used for educational purposes. Short (2012) argues that the game can be used to develop scientific literacy of chemistry and physics topics as well as geometric mathematical concepts and suggests applications of the game for the classroom. Gauquier and Schneider (2013) used adolescents' interest in Minecraft to encourage participation in their library's

summer reading program by creating a Minecraft-themed reward system. Recognizing the possibilities of an educational market, the game developers released MinecraftEDU and now some schools are integrating the game into their curricula. One Stockholm school has made playing Minecraft a mandatory part of their curriculum in which students are required to play the game in order to increase creative thinking and learn about city planning and environmental issues (iD tech camps, 2013). While the literature has recognized children's interest in the game and the value of Minecraft for scientific and mathematical learning, I was interested in investigating how the game Minecraft mediated my son's emergent literacy development.

There is a longstanding tradition within literacy research to examine the literacy development of the children in one's own family. In fact, according to Barone (2001), one of the first book-length literacy case studies was conducted by a librarian in New Zealand who kept a diary of her daughter's experiences with books over a four-year period (White, 1956). Since then, researchers in the field of literacy have conducted numerous studies of their own children and grandchildren (see Baghban, 1984; Bissex, 1980; & Butler, 1975) and have worked to advance the field in important ways, such as recognizing the importance of social factors on a young child's literacy development as well as early understandings of phonemic awareness (Barone, 2001). In many of these studies, researchers used retrospective note-taking following natural book reading episodes with the young children as the method of data collection for their studies.

More recently, a researcher co-authored with his teenage daughters an analysis of the ways in which they engaged with literacy at home using a time-use protocol and then engaged in interviews about the daughters' multiple literacies (Bean, Bean, & Bean, 1999). Similarly, Merchant (2001) studied his teenage daughters and their friends' use of Internet

chatrooms in order to understand teenagers' social and linguistic interactions in this virtual space. Exploring the literacy practices of children in our homes allows researchers to gain extended first hand engagement with the phenomenon of study that is a key feature of qualitative research (Hatch, 2002).

Following in this tradition of familial literacy inquiries, the purpose of this article is to explore how the game Minecraft mediated the literacy development of an emergent first-grade reader, my son Owen. As a result of this exploration, I argue that games such as Minecraft have the potential to enhance the literacy development of an emergent reader by blurring the lines between in and out of school literacies, building cultural capital that contributes to self-initiated literacy events, and developing digital literacy.

I approach this exploration with the dual identities of a literacy scholar and parent. While my background as a literacy scholar who bases her work on a multiple literacies perspective helps me see the value in games such as Minecraft, I have found the game to be more problematic from the perspective of a mother. This analysis also serves to reconcile the struggles I have experienced in monitoring my son's experience with the game so as to allow him to benefit from the entertainment and developmental values of the game while also helping him to learn to self-monitor his uses of technology and begin to learn to be a critical consumer of video games and the Internet.

Theoretical Understandings of Video Games and Literacy

Owen's experiences with Minecraft are viewed through the theoretical lens Gee (2007) offers in his book What Video Games Have to Teach Us. Gee argues that video games are an exemplary example of multimodal texts because in addition to mixing words and images, they also mix sounds, music, movement, and bodily sensations. Gee argues that rather than holding a narrow understanding of literacy as reading and writing printed texts,

we need to understand literacy in terms of semiotic domains, which as he explains is a "fancy way" of saying that different things take on meaning in different contexts (p. 19).

Gee (2007) advances the idea that when learners engage in a new semiotic domain, they experience the world in new ways, become affiliated with other people who engage in the same semiotic domain (an affinity group) and develop resources that prepare learners for future experiences in the same and similar domains. He refers to this type of engagement as "active learning" (p. 24). To engage in critical learning within a semiotic domain, Gee (2007) explains that in addition to operating as an active learner as previously described, learners must also see the semiotic domain as a design space, "internally as a system of interrelated elements making up the possible content of the domain and externally as ways of thinking, acting, interacting, and valuing" (p. 32) that is shared with others in the affinity group. When video games are played in a way that allows for critical learning, they can be important domains in which children can interpret, make, shape, and communicate meaning.

Owen's experiences with Minecraft were also viewed through Street and Street's (1991) conception of "school literacy" and my own awareness of how my middle-class upbringing and background as a literacy scholar have influenced the home literacy experiences that value school literacy over other forms of literacy. Like the homes Street and Street (1991) describe from their research, my home is "full of toys, games, and videos that [are] explicitly directed toward school achievement and readiness" (p. 155), and like the participants in their study, in my mother-child interactions with my son, we:

> … adopt the roles of teachers and learners; a toy is treated not as a source of 'play,' to be used according to the cultural conventions associated with leisure, relaxation, childhood, and so on, but instead is located within a framework of teaching and learning,

scaffolding the child to future academic achievement (p. 159-160).

Using Street and Street's (1991) lens of school literacy, I recognize that in my role as a mother, my ability to recognize the value in Owen's interactions with video games has been limited by this narrow conception of literacy in relation to the value of toys and games in the home. By juxtaposing Gee's (2007) broad conception of literacy as semiotic domains against Street and Street's (1991) narrower school literacy, I can better analyze the ways in which Owen engaged with literacy learning through his interactions with the game Minecraft and understand my own responses to the game as his mother.

Owen's Literacy Development Mediated through Minecraft

Over a three-month period, I observed Owen's engagement with Minecraft-related activities, such as playing the game and watching YouTube videos by other gamers, engaged in informal conversations with Owen about his Minecraft experiences, collected artifacts of all school work that Owen brought home in which Owen drew on his experiences with and affinity for Minecraft, and video-recorded Owen taking me on a 10-minute tour of his Minecraft world. The following discussion explores how Owen's literacy development was mediated by his experiences as a player of Minecraft.

Blurring In and Out of School Literacies

Owen's identity as a player of Minecraft became evident in the school work he brought home. Writing samples in which he was able to self-select topics were frequently written about playing the game Minecraft. In one particular text, Owen was asked to write about having a super power. He wrote: "If I had a super power it would be lava that is burning. If I had lava power I would burn the school down. That is what I would do if I had powers" (see Figure 1.)
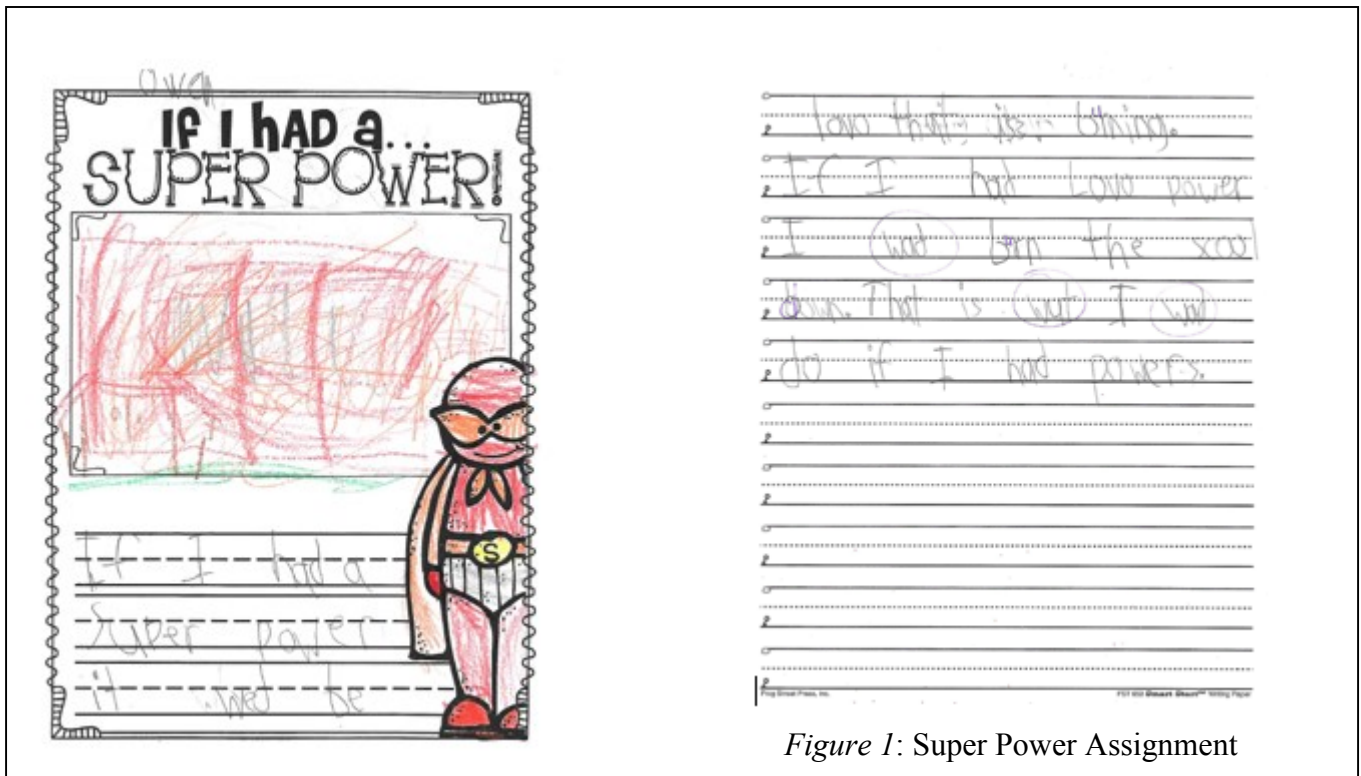
Figure 1: Super Power Assignment

As a mother and former teacher, I was shocked and concerned to see that he had written about burning the school down on a class assignment. I was even more surprised that his teacher corrected spelling errors in his writing but didn't address the content of the writing with Owen or with me. When I showed him the paper and asked him why he wrote about burning down the school he became very upset and apologized. It was clear that he knew it was inappropriate to burn down his school. In the game Minecraft, however, buildings burn down frequently as a result of lava. This classroom assignment illustrates the ways in which Owen was thinking within the design space of Minecraft when he was crafting his writing (Gee, 2007).

It is also important to point out that throughout the observation period, Owen referred to the game as "Mind Craft" on all written artifacts. This is consistent with the way he described the game early on as illustrated in the opening quote and his belief that the game made him more creative.

In addition to using the game as a topic for teacher-directed assignments, Owen also self-selected to engage in writing events in school on Minecraft topics. Owen designed a Minecraft building plan book that included structures he wanted to build in his Minecraft world complete with illustrations. When I asked him about the plan book, he explained that he and his friends each made books about Minecraft during free time at the end of the day. Owen's plan book included the following plans:

1. Build a park.
2. Build a pool.
3. Figure out how to go to the Hunger Games.
4. Figure out how to connect to Stampy the Cat on "mind craft."

This writing event illustrates the way Owen was using literacy in school to plan the ways in which he would engage with the game once he came home. The friends he worked with to make the plan books represent the affinity group he gained membership in through playing the game.

Owen's sight vocabulary has also increased as a result of playing the game. During the

video-recorded tour of Owen's Minecraft world, Owen demonstrated the ability to read text on the screen that was more advanced than what he would be able to read in a book assigned for school. When asked how he could read the words, he explained that he learned them from an online gamer whose videos he watches on YouTube.
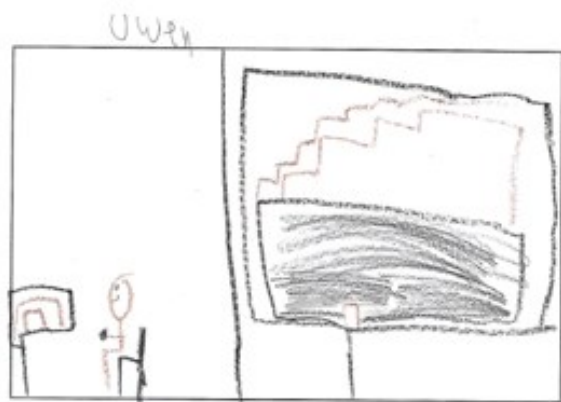

Figure 2: "Mind Craft" Building Plan Book

Building Cultural Capital

Discussions with Owen about how his playing of Minecraft influenced his interactions with peers revealed that he gained membership into his peer group in large part because of his experiences playing Minecraft. While Owen gained cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985) through his experiences playing the game, his capital was limited by the platform on which he played. Owen plays the Android app version of the game on his Nextbook, an off-brand tablet. His version of the game does not allow for multiplayer interactions within the same Minecraft world.

Some of Owen's friends, however, play on either an Xbox or Playstation 3, which allows them to play in multiplayer spaces and gain experiences that Owen is unable to access. Marsh (2011), in an investigation of the ways in which 11-year-old children used literacy to develop a social order in a virtual world, found that the children in the study built cultural capital "through knowledge of the game itself, and the wider one's experience in the game, the richer one's cultural capital" (p. 109). The device Owen plays the game on has created a glass ceiling for the cultural capital that he can build through the game.

In a school assignment in which Owen was asked to write about what he would do with a million dollars, Owen wrote: "If I made a million dollars I would buy two hundred Xboxes. They would all have mind craft on it. I will build a world on mind craft. It will be fun making two hundred worlds on mind craft. That is all I would if I had million dollars" (see figure 3). While Owen's desire to buy 200 Xboxes might seem silly and excessive, it demonstrates the way he has come to associate the game and ownership of devices to play the game with the objectified state of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1985).

Figure 3: Mission Dollars Assignment

Developing Digital Literacy

In their interview study with K-2 grade children, Dodge, Husain, and Duke (2011) found that most of the children were in "an emergent stage of meaning making in relation to the Internet" (p. 95). The children had a very limited understanding not only of the range of information available on the Internet, but also of the social and ethical issues related to Internet use. Through Owen's Minecraft related activities, the limitedness of his understanding of the Internet and the limitedness of his digital literacies has become clear.

Lankshear and Knobel (2008) explain that both operational and conceptual definitions of digital literacies exist in the literature. Conceptual definitions focus on ideal meanings of the term, such as "digital literacy enables us to match the medium we use to the kind of information we are presenting and to the audience we are presenting to" (Lankshear & Knobel, 2008, p. 3). Operational definitions focus more on the specific skills a user of technology must have in order to successfully carry out functions using the technology.

Owen's limited digital literacy both in terms of conceptual and operational definitions became most evident in his viewing of "Stampy the Cat" videos on YouTube and his strong desire to "connect to Stampy Cat" on the Internet. Concerned that my six-year-old son wanted to connect to a grown man who makes videos of his Minecraft playing and posts them to YouTube for children to watch, I researched the gamer and was relieved to discover that while he does in fact make the videos in his bedroom, the gamer is currently working to develop an educational YouTube channel. In an interview, Joseph Garrett, A.K.A. Mr. Stampy Cat, remarked on the ways in which children who are members of the Minecraft affinity group want to connect with him through social media and claimed to be cognizant of ensuring his videos are family-friendly because of his large following of children (Dredge, 2014).

Owen's experiences using the YouTube website creates the opportunity for him to further develop his digital literacies both in conceptual and operational ways. Internet safety is an important issue for children of the 21st Century. Owen's desire to connect with an adult user of the Internet has allowed us to have critical conversations about ways to be safe on the Internet and discussions about how the Internet is produced and consumed by millions of users.

Conclusion

Based on my inquiry into Owen's engagement with the game, I argue that games such as Minecraft have the potential to enhance the literacy development of an emergent reader by blurring the lines between in and out of school literacies, building cultural capital that contributes to self-initiated literacy events, and developing digital literacy. While I am able to better appreciate the ways Owen is growing as a literacy learner, it is still necessary for me, in my role as parent, to monitor his video game usage, help him to set limits, and monitor his own behaviors. Even though I have become convinced through this exploration that video games have value in the literacy development of an emergent reader, they shouldn't replace other ways of engaging in literacy events. As a literacy scholar and as his mother, my goal is to embrace my multiple literacies foundation and provide as many opportunities to engage in as many variations of literacy as possible for my son and to help him recognize that video games are only one piece to a very large puzzle.

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