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'GOOD GAME'

TEXT AND COMMUNITY IN MULTIPLAYER COMPUTER GAMES

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In education circles, most stories of young people and the Internet are about prescription, regulation, and control. These stories tend to be polarized between uncritical enthusiasts who believe almost anything is possible by virtue of the technology per se, and those who fear the advent of electronic technologies brings with it the dissolution of all that might be valued in the world we know. This polarization becomes particularly problematic in discussions of young people's out-of-school engagement with online technoculture—in computer games, chat sites, and online forums. In the technologically determinist stance that characterizes much of the writing about young people and technology, attention to their interactions with the unregulated realms of cyberspace is too challenging, too hard, with "the majority of stories that have been told about cyberspace . . . characterized by a profound failure of imagination" (Bingham, Valentine, and Holloway 1999: 655).

Yet it is important that we look more closely at the kinds of practices and pleasures entailed in young people's engagement with cyberspace and online culture. As Nixon (2003) notes:

computers and the new media are increasingly central to the lives of today's children and youth . . . global popular media culture, including online culture, has become integrally bound up with children's and teenagers' affiliations, identities and pleasures. . . . This kind of social participation is integrally bound up with the ways in which symbolic meanings are made, negotiated and contested, and is therefore of central concern to literacy research. (407-408)

This chapter reports on a study that explored the textual engagement, pleasures, and literacies involved in playing online computer games. It examines the ways in which a group of young people, aged 15-16, read and utilized the intersections between traditional print-based text, visual images, symbols, sound, interactivity, and other elements to play and make sense of a range of real-time strategy (RTS), role-playing game (RPG), and first-person shooter (FPS) games. Consideration is given to the nature of the game-playing community, and how players enter and use it, to issues of interpretation, representation, community, and response involved in playing with real or virtual absent partners online, and the place of games and gaming among other text-based leisure activities in the young people's lives.

The world of multiplayer computer games provides both a public and private arena for textual play. Playing online games, young people are simultaneously immersed in the complex narrative detail and ambience of the game and in interaction with other known and unknown players with whom they create and negotiate realtime episodes in the cyberworld. In so doing, they engage in a range of practices that in earlier times might have been characterized as literary, dramatic, or aesthetic, but are here reconfigured as multimodal and interactive. Both texts and literacy practices are constituted in real time for those who play, but occur within the virtual parameters of cyberspace, often outside or parallel to the usual normalities of circadian time.

Multiplayer computer games also provide a site in which to explore how new communities and identities are forged online, and how online culture is located within other aspects of young people's textual lives. Gee's (2001) description of games as "networked semiotic domains" is particularly apt. Games are sites for learning that link meaning-making, knowledge, and identity. Both for their own satisfaction in the game, and for the ways they present themselves in performative online display, game players are actively engaged in learning to negotiate and master this domain.

THE STUDY

Interested in the intersections between literacy, popular culture, and identity, I invited six Australian teenagers aged 15-16 to be filmed and interviewed as they played a range of multiplayer and online games. The students were approached through a school where staff had an interest in

the implications of young people's engagement with technoculture for English and literacy curriculum. In particular, the teachers wanted to understand the ways in which literacy is changing in the context of the use of new technologies. The group comprised five boys (James, Pete, Alan, Henry, and Rob) and one girl (Anna); the game-playing sessions and interviews took place out of school hours in the technology center adjacent to the library. Students were interviewed about their game-playing habits and preferences, videotaped as they played specific games, then interviewed again about what happened as they played. The games ranged across RPG, RTS, and FPS games—*Baldur's Gate II* (Anna, James), *Yuri's Revenge* (Pete), *Red Alert 2* (Alan), *Counterstrike* (Henry), and *Age of Empires 2* (Rob).

The six students were all keen players, with high levels of expertise in their chosen games and considerable experience playing online. In their interviews, and as they played, they moved fluidly between their knowledge of the game and their immersion in it, their skills and understandings of the game, and their real-time interaction with online opponents. The game-playing sessions took place after school, mid-afternoon Australian time.

Interviews were analyzed to explore a range of issues related to the games and game-playing. The videotaped sessions, together with students' descriptions and discussions of the games, provided detailed examples of how literacy and narrative are reconfigured in the contexts of these games. These data sources also raised issues specific to the negotiation and playing of games. Overall, the data provided a glimpse of the reading practices, textual worlds, relationships, and peer culture opened to young players by such games.

MULTIPLAYER GAMES

With the introduction and rapid development of video and computer games since the 1970s, new forms of narrative and textual participation have entered young people's lives. Histories of the form (Berger 2002; Demaria and Wilson 2002) trace its development from graphics-based games like *Pong* (1972), through those with latent but largely unexploited narrative elements *Space Invaders* (1978), to fantasy, strategy, and role-playing games and a range of other genres. Fantasy and role-playing games such as *Myst* (1993) or its sequel *Riven* (1995) draw explicitly on the iconography and narrative structures and elements of classic fantasy and mythology. These games, argue Bolter and Grusin (2000), trace back to

Tolkien in their generic elements: their plot, their spread, their characters, their atmosphere. In doing so, they remediate (Bolter and Grusin 2000)—remake, re-utilize—these older forms, adding visual and filmic elements to the written and oral verbal forms.

As Berger (2002) notes, the increasing sophistication of the technology, and the greater depth and power made available by formats, such as CD-ROMs and DVDs, has enabled the development of games with complex, branching narratives, rich visuals and scenarios, and extensive possibilities and alternatives in characters, problems, and so on. Immersion in the complex narrative, interactivity, and a multiplicity of weapons, skills, and the like are central feature of most online games, and are particularly highlighted in RPG and RTS games. Within the industry, it is argued that games have evolved to the point where they “represent something relatively new in the entertainment world: interactive narrative texts with multi-dimensional characters” (Berger 2002: 9). Research to further intensify the narrative experience of the game, through the development of new forms of interactive storytelling, is at the forefront of the industry. Further developments are likely to include the incorporation of speech and natural language, in the attempt to “extend . . . the status of computer games towards that of a proper medium, and to attract new audiences across age and gender barriers” (Charles, Mead, and Cavazza 2002: 103).

Multiplayer games are the logical extension of stand-alone games. Often a further development of games that might be first encountered as single-player games, they utilize the capacities of cyberspace and the Internet to provide the opportunity to interact with other players online. At any given time, tens of thousands of potential partners or opponents may be logged on internationally, on servers based throughout the world, with thousands of games in progress simultaneously. Players choose a location and connect to a server. Some servers offer multiple sessions of the one game. Players may invite others to start a new game, or join an existing one. Other servers offer a single continuous session that players may join and leave at their will. Games themselves are supported by game discussion sites—forums or chat rooms—where players meet, where play may be negotiated, issues raised, and aspects of the game discussed. This chat may be moderated or supervised by senior players, the site makers who host the forums, chosen on the basis of their knowledge and expertise to act as administrators. In these forums, depending on the game and the administrator’s priorities, a restrained level of censorship may apply. Within the games themselves, further discussion is possible through the use of in-game chat, whereby players can type verbal messages and replies.

Multiplayer computer games show the possibilities and affordances (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) offered by online technology. As such, they provide the opportunity to explore the use and development of multimodal literacies, in the real and evolving contexts of design and play. It is not just new images that are created, but new forms of narrative and interactivity, and new literacy practices among players. Games’ incorporation of a wide range of semiotic forms and modes provide quintessential instances of the expansion of meaning making to include a range of visual and nonprint visual, aural and interactive representational forms. Games themselves, some argue, require the development of new grammars that acknowledge the animation and interactivity specific to new media. Burn and Parker (2001), for example, propose such a model coining the word “kineikonic” to connote “movement” and “image” thereby accounting for space and time. Observing young people as they play provides the opportunity to explore dimensions of these new literacies in the real-world context of game play.

THE APPEAL OF MULTIPLAYER GAMES

For the students in the study, the chance to play with real opponents or partners provided the double attraction of a more challenging game than playing against the computer (as is the case with single-player versions of the game) and the chance to be part of an online community. The pleasures of single-player games, where players pit themselves against the computer or the game, can be enhanced when other players become involved. For all the richness of technology, and the multiply branching options built into stand-alone games, the computer nonetheless is perceived as a limited partner or opponent, by comparison with what a human partner can bring to bear. This sense of possibility and expansiveness is further underlined by the belief that human opponents potentially could come from almost anywhere. As Alan put it:

The difference with online games is you’re playing against a human opponent whereas when you’re playing against computers it’s not as challenging and can get a bit repetitive. Whereas online . . . it’s also a novelty that you can play with anyone from around the world, anywhere, and be playing against human opponents.

Clearly, novelty and community are important dimensions of the experience of playing online. But more is on offer than just this. By contrast with single-player games, multiplayer gaming increases the complexity and challenge of the game. Real players mean greater demands, better tactics and strategy, more available weapons and resources, and the possibility of team play. In describing the differences between the multiplayer and single player versions of *Yuri's Revenge*, Pete emphasized the escalation in levels of tactics and skill:

First, the tactics they use are completely different. In multiplayer you're using all the scope and yet inventing new tactics just on the hop, as you go along, trying to counter what your enemy is doing. And in the single player versions they're just doing the set something, their attacks and responses are all preprogrammed in. The way they build their bases and defenses are pretty much preprogrammed in, so it's easier to just get around it.

COMMUNITY AND IDENTITY ONLINE

As has long been noted, the Internet has far-reaching implications for how we shape and understand identity and community—"changing the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities" (Turkle 1995: 9). For game players, cyberspace provides the forum and opportunity for communal engagement with other players around the common ground of the known text, the chosen game.

Players engage both individually and collectively, as opponents or as partners, in game play. To do so, great care is taken with the ways they present themselves online. A player needs to demonstrate both skill and desirability as a partner or worthy opponent. Unlike most chat sites, where there are few limits on the construction of a persona, and language is the primary medium through which presentation and communication take place, in the case of games, identities cannot so be so readily assumed and occupied. Players quickly learn that they are assessed and evaluated not just through the ways they conduct and present themselves in speech, but more importantly, through the ways they play.

Expertise and authority in the specific game must be displayed. Game play itself becomes a site for performativity, an "'arena of action' in which to manifest and organize displays of social competence" (Hutchby and

Moran-Ellis 2001: 2). Expertise is demonstrated through skill, experience, and knowledge of the game, and through other demonstrations of authority, such as rankings or reputation. This works in counterpoint to the verbal interaction in individual games and in the related forums. Players demonstrate understandings and abilities in the game itself, giving authority to the postures and positions taken up verbally or alternatively showing up exaggerations or inflated claims. Within game forums, as in verbal interaction within the games, the language used, and even the amount of chat, mark out initiates from "newbies."

Establishing oneself as authoritative involves a number of dimensions. James, a *Diablo 2* and *Baldur's Gate II* player, sought to present himself as "one of the better gamers." Just as in the physical world, factors here included not just demonstrated skills at the game, but also social positioning, acceptance by the right people, being seen in the right company:

What I try to do is I try to get within a group with people who I know are more influential and powerful within the gaming community than I am, and by getting in with them I can get in with others and it sort of goes on, pretty much the same as a new school situation.

James set out to impress people he regarded as influential. One strategy for doing so was to achieve high skill levels by playing the game in its stand-alone, one-player form before launching himself online, so that he came in already with considerable expertise. Another was to find ways to charm and challenge players whose respect he wanted to earn, through the combined medium of language and his skill at the game. A third was to demonstrate shared values and solidarity, again through the way the game was played and through discussion on the forums and chat sites:

You've got to have some knowledge of the game itself and how to play it and the tricks there, which is why I spend time playing with the single play so I know what to expect. [Then] I will jump straight in and multiplayer . . . I think if you can work it so that you're playing in a way which is something that they [your opponents] enjoy doing, [that] challenges them or convinces them that they're doing stuff right as well, then that's a way to get in with them. And, of course, if you can show the same type of "ideals" as them, whether it be within the game or within just chatting before or after the gaming sessions then that will also help you as well.

Not only was the capacity both to excite and win over desirable opponents important, so too were the linguistically mediated social skills to smooth over hurt and defeat. Pre- and postgaming chat-site interludes were an integral part of the construction and mending of relationships and of the maintenance of acceptance and position within the online community:

A lot of the time that I spend when I'm online is I'm just sort of cruising around talking to people that I know. And by talking to those people I can sort of patch up the friendships that may have been destroyed when this guy, you know, didn't do something right, and so you can do it like that. Or, if you—before the game, talk about what you're going to do, and how much you enjoyed the last night's session and what you think could be improved, just sort of like debriefing sessions. And I think that is one of the best things about it, because you can approach everything from a really tactical point of view and you can put into practice all of these strategies you thought. . . . Well, if I had someone else who was there, who was thinking the same thing as me, I could have done this, and that's one of the things that I find. (James)

The presentation of self, and, in James' phrase, "your place in this food chain," also depends on the ways in which the particular player interprets and responds to others online. Paralleling the verbal and skills-based presentation of self is the need to find ways to identify and assess those who are presenting themselves to other players. Reading others is the exact counterpart to presenting a self to be read. Skills of interpretation and deconstruction are as important as those of representation. Just as players like James seek to convey an image of themselves as desirable, authoritative, and just players, so too they need to be able to identify and make judgements about others who present themselves to them. Here, as earlier, impressions are almost totally mediated through language and through intimate knowledge of the game—how it is played, skill levels, and demonstrated actual knowledge. The capacity to make these judgments is fundamental to effective game playing and participation in the community. Judgments arise primarily in relation to four key areas: identifying opponents' skill levels, choosing partners, recognizing authorities, and identifying cheats.

Pete, a *Yuri's Revenge* player, described the ways inexperienced or unskilled players might give themselves away through overuse or misuse of chat options within the game, as distinct from on the related forum and chat sites:

Sometimes you can tell if a person's going to be an easy win or not. The sort of people who are just like, fresh new people full of energy, but they're not very good, and they're playing it just for an hour. They'll chat a whole lot to you and then you can sort of tell, oh yeah, it's going to be an easy win, if they're really chatty, so most people don't chat much [during the game].

Highly skilled players, by contrast, are recognized for their experience and expertise (as James observed "that would make an influential person in any field"), and also for the roles they may occupy in the meta-level world that surrounds most games in the game and chat forums online. These include recruiting and leading teams or clans from the range of players online, or acting as regulators of the game. Helping others and providing new information on game chat sites also provide mechanisms for influential players to maintain their position, while furthering the game and increasing less experienced players' respect for them:

[You recognize a person is experienced] through what they say during a before-gaming session chat type thing. You can say to them: "Well, I got stuck here, what can I do?" and they have a solution which you think would work and it does. Or if they have shown that they have a deeper level [of knowledge or access], like if they come in and they say: "I just got word of someone who's got into the gaming files and has made an entirely new game using all the files there," then that shows that they have some idea of what's going on. (James)

Identifying cheats and hackers is particularly important. Their actions range from undermining the pleasure of the game to doing material harm to players through accessing their accounts or passwords or entering into dubious financial deals, for example, selling games weapons for real money online. What counts as lawful is a matter of considerable debate. The maverick, frontier nature of cyberspace is reflected both in the anarchic and incessant development of new forms of "cheats" and in the ways in which such matters are negotiated and pronounced on in games forums. In a compelling instance of language as social practice, through such debates, rules and parameters are established, tested, and stretched. Both the rules and the community are evolving and entrepreneurial, but at the same time monitored and regulated by the huge numbers of online contributors and those appointed by games makers and by their peers as regulators for the site.

EARTHBOUND DIMENSIONS OF GAME PLAY

Distributed, real-time multiplayer computer games allow games to be played online with many other potential players over extended boundaries of time and space. As Alan's comments show, the chance to play with human opponents rather than the computer is an important part of their appeal. In theory it is always possible to find a game on a local or international server. Paradoxically, however, despite the apparent openness and multiplicity of times and players available across the globe, the real time in which the game-playing in this study took place—mid-afternoon in Australia—did not necessarily allow players to readily join a game. Despite the rhetoric, the difficulties experienced by students in the study suggest there are periods of "dead time": Negotiating oneself into a game online is not always a matter of instant gratification but can take time. There appear to be peak playing times, generally in the evenings and late afternoon, according to different games. Despite the apparently limitless and timeless nature of cyberspace, latitude-based time continues to shape the ways in which games are played.

Similarly, real-world economics, geography, and demography shape choices players make about "where" they play. Although servers are available internationally, the volume of traffic and high quality of service on American servers, in particular US West, means that more games are available, and are more likely to be played on these servers rather than elsewhere. More players are online, with better levels of perceived support.

Language also affects the choices players make. Despite the hegemony of English elsewhere in cyberspace, it is not necessarily the case that all games are played in English. Thus, although players may join servers in Korea and Europe, for example, the games do not discriminate between languages. Players themselves may not be English speakers, or did not choose English as the language in which to play. Furthermore, game-playing folklore has it that there are cultural differences in the style of play that also influence the choices players make in this regard.

In some games, for example, first person shooters such as *Counterstrike* (2000), speed is of the essence. In these instances, the common time zones offered by Australian servers offer faster connection speeds or PING, so that these servers are popular for games that rely on extremely fast response times. Even then, however, parallel time zones are

not in themselves enough. Unless players have access to high-speed connections, playing these games on the Internet is slow and cumbersome. Otherwise infinitesimal lags in connection (slow PING) interfere with the speed of shooting and hence the game's effectiveness and player satisfaction. To counteract these drawbacks, and to produce optimal conditions for communal game play, players without access to this high cost, high-level technology frequently play the game in local area networks (LANs). LANs provide the opportunity for the real and the virtual to be combined, in an enclosed space, through the physical presence of embodied players playing on networked computers simultaneously. This was Henry's usual experience of *Counterstrike*—played online, but against his real-world friends in the same space, in real-world time

GENDERED DIMENSIONS OF ONLINE PLAY

Significantly, the only girl in the study, Anna, valued the space of online playing differently. For Anna, the appeal of the online community was not so much its novelty as its apparent manageability, and the opportunity to be part of a team. Online playing offered a version of interaction and community where she could control the level of involvement and intensity, and regulate her space and the ways other people related to her:

You can work with other people you can't see face-to-face. I hate playing a game at home and my brother comes in, cause he's very annoying all the time, but if you play online you can talk to people but you don't have to deal with them quite as much. Also there's more teamwork and there's just different people all the time.

Anna played *Baldur's Gate II*, a highly sophisticated role-playing game. Whereas the boys in the study focused largely on the competition offered by online play, Anna explored the implications of teamwork versus individual work/decisions/problem solving. In *Baldur's Gate*, as in most games, players make choices about the characters they play. In this game, characters, and therefore players, work as teams, recruiting others as they go. Anna foregrounded the trade-offs she experienced between single and multiplayer games in terms of sharing and loss of control:

With single player [games] you're in control of all the characters and you don't have to talk to people, share, in as much as you know exactly where everything is. With multiplayer you might be in control of only one character, and you need to rely on other characters more for healing or spells or whatever.

This interdependence and interconnectedness is an important part of the pleasure of playing in this way, but has implications for individual players' choice of character, and consequently their role and how they play the game. Anna's choice of character when she entered a multiplayer version of the game would be determined by what the team seemed to need. By choice, she usually played a Druid or a Ranger because she liked their particular mix of attributes and abilities. (As she described them: "A Ranger is a fighter with a link to nature and animals; a Druid is a priest with a link to nature."). However, in choosing whom to play, she would be guided by the composition of the team she found online:

It depends what character is in the group. If you've got a group of all fighters, then you need a priest in there to help heal. If you've got one that's mostly images or priests then you need a fighter in there to balance it out.

This decision, then, is made in terms of the greater good for the team, rather than on the basis of individual preferences. This approach stands in marked contrast to an approach whereby a favorite character is developed to a high level and retained from other games. In those instances, the player's choice is based more on individual satisfaction and the desire for agency than on a reading of what kind of character the game at that point needs. The study was too small to determine whether such patterns of selection are gender-based or solely dependent on the game, but Anna's choices do suggest that different gender-based orientations to team playing may obtain.

As a girl in the game-playing world, Anna was very conscious of the gendered nature of most games. She spoke of her discomfort in games where the only character options available were male, and she found herself the subject of flirting from female characters encountered in the game. In *Baldur's Gate II*, characters can be taken up as male or female. However, despite this ostensible equity, the outcomes are not the same. As Anna explained:

In *Baldur's Gate* there's a character bias, there's not quite as many girl characters . . . *Baldur's Gate II* is designed for boys to play, as a lot of games are, and they have girl characters flirting with the main character. *Baldur's Gate II* doesn't have quite that problem with the character you play, the girl, but you won't become lord of a certain keep if you're a girl, you just save the place and don't get as much of a reward.

Anna's pleasure in the world of *Baldur's Gate*, and her fluency and expertise with fantasy of this kind in other genres, meant that she observed but put up with the game's gender bias to continue to play. In addition to *Baldur's Gate II*, Anna pursued her interest in fantasy of this kind in other on- and offline forums. She was writing a fantasy story, read widely in the fantasy field, and was part of an online writing group creating an ongoing fantasy in the style of *Dungeons and Dragons*. She thus had both authority and agency as a player of RPGs, yet was forced to tolerate gender-based subjectification and harassment through the games she played. In a context where Barbie makers, Mattel, have recently bought out one of the few feminist voices in girls' gaming, *Purple Moon* (Lynch 2000), the range of representations of female characters, whether in purpose designed "girls' games" or in RPG or RTS games, risks become even more polarized. This is a problem for male as well as female players in a context where players are encouraged to take up a mix of first-, second- and third-person positions in relation to the character they play, with the possibility of identification with that character explicitly encouraged by the rhetoric of the game as they play.

OLD LITERACIES AND NEW: MEANING-MAKING AND COMPUTER GAMES

The adage that new technologies are changing literacy is nowhere more evident than in computer games. To play the game, players need to move between old and new genres, print, visual, aural, and other forms, static and moving images, attend to multiple still and moving images, and to gesture, color, icons and sound. Furthermore, computer games draw on a range of textual and intertextual knowledge relating both to the narrative and to the genre of game.

Segmented Screens

As Bolter and Grusin (2000) note, players are required to look both at and through the screen. Role-playing and fantasy games in particular:

seek the real, sometimes through transparency and sometimes through hypermediacy—sometimes by encouraging the player to look through the surface of the screen, and sometimes by dwelling on the surface with its multiplicity of mediated objects. (94)

Games used in the study all feature segmented screens. The animated action of the game occupied the largest, central section of the screen, with supplementary information supplied in icons in separate sections down the side and sometimes beneath the screen. Icons down the side can be clicked to provide additional information or provide access to related screens. In other instances, changes in shape or color indicate the changing status of elements of the game such as health or availability. All games require players to mediate and move between these icons and the animated game play, and in the case of *Baldur's*, and others of that genre, to attend also to the text options presented to players by game characters. The students moved between these different information sets with ease, attending also to nonpictorial elements such as sound, and additional visual triggers in the game.

Talk

In some games, such as *Baldur's Gate II*, space underneath the central section provides for dialogue options integral to the progression of the game. These take the form of multiple-choice questions and responses between characters. Choice of answers relate both to the action to be taken and to the personality of game characters and the relationships between them. Provision for typing in additional chat between players represents a second set of dialogue options in most games. This additional chat serves a number of functions, and unlike the game directed options just described, is entirely controlled by players. They can type what they like, albeit for the most part coded within the culture, language and conventions of the community. Chat can impart information and direct the opponent's actions: "Kill me, I've got to go" (Pete); add to the spirit of the game: Rob typed in "Aaggh, aaggh, aaggh" for atmosphere when his men were being cut down.

It can also be part of the ritual courtesies and formalities on opening or finishing the game: "GG"—(good game) typed in to mark closure (James).

Color

In addition to its central role in creating the immersive world of the game, color works more specifically to signify options and possibilities, and contributes to the construction of character. In *Baldur's Gate*, colored circles around the feet of characters indicate whether the character is friendly, hostile, or neutral (green, red, and blue). Other color-based cues include blue highlighting of objects to indicate that interactivity is possible (*Baldur's Gate*) or the appropriateness or otherwise of a possible site on which to build (*Red Alert II*). It can also be important in creating personalities and the representation of self. In *Baldur's Gate*, for example, the creation of characters requires a range of choices and the selection of attributes, including skin and clothing color as well as weaponry, gender, role, and race. Anna described how these came together and the effect people chose to have in this way on other players:

With the character portrait some people choose ones that look nice, some will choose ones which have a lot more character. There are some that look very evil. Some people try very hard to be evil.

Anna explained the role of color and dress in the construction of character, and the ways these contributed to create the chosen impression:

In *Baldur's Gate* it lets you have the character portrait and it also lets you have colors of the clothes and skin and hair that you see from a distance, so that a character that's all black makes a different impression from a character that's blue or white. [Colors help characters convey] what they want to be, or what they want people to think.

Anna herself chose skin and hair tones similar to her own, and usually dressed her character in green to indicate an affinity with nature.

Dimensionality

In some games, spatial information is also extremely useful. In *Counterstrike*, knowing the map, or layout of the game, helps players anticipate

traps and danger, know where to “camp” or where others might be camping, know when to shoot and when to risk being seen (see also Gee 2001). The game plays further with the spatial orientation and point of view by tilting the screen view sideways to show the sky and buildings foreshortening when the player dies—a self-referential joke made unnervingly immediate by virtue of its three dimensional feel. In the strategy games, *Red Alert II*, and its extension, *Yuri's Revenge*, maps show the layout of the game, as far as it's been explored, and potentially at least the location of the enemy, which may or may not be obscured by the “fog of war.” Pete and James described the functions of some of the icons on the screen's right-hand side and the ways they attended to them:

Anything [in the map] that is black is undiscovered territory, whereas—it's called the fog of war—so, well, as your units move into it they can see more of it. . . . And this bar here, next to the building icons it shows your power supply or it goes from red to yellow to green. And to keep it up to supply your buildings with power, you have to build power plants or for the Soviet Tesla Reactors, and if you lose, if you lose your power plants then the power bar will go down, you'll see that later in the game, when that happens, and things like your radar will cease to function. (Pete)

Your map at the side of the screen doesn't come up straight away, you need to build the building for it, when that comes up it tells you a lot and you scout around, see the other person's base, see what they're doing and it helps for quickly moving around the map a little better. At the side there are a whole lot of buttons that builds stuff for you. That's just building buttons, just controlling. Most of the game play is just what you see on screen and you control stuff in what's on the screen. (James)

Sound

Sound is important in a number of ways. Sound is used to signal activity, accentuate action and provide information (e.g., the steady stream of “unit complete” statements that accompanies building in *Red Alert II* and *Yuri's Revenge*). It also seems of key importance in creating realism and intensifying the immersive feeling of the game. In *Baldur's Gate*, for example, players choose how they wish their character to sound when he or she speaks, from a range of options, whereas accents and emphasis from char-

acters that are fixed features of the game also contribute to the nuanced feeling of the narrative. A steady drumbeat and stream of military orders underlies *Red Alert II* and *Yuri's Revenge*. *Baldur's Gate* is punctuated by periodic utterances and demands. Sound is an important element in the movie clips that introduce and mark stages in the game. In *Baldur's Gate*, for example, music, the roar of flames, the scratch of pen on paper, the beat of rain, and the somber voice of the narrator all contribute to the portentous sense of doom in the movie clip that introduces the game and make links to what has gone before.

COMPUTER GAMES AND TEXTUAL WORLDS

Computer games represent one part of young people's textual worlds, alongside engagement with many texts of other kinds. The students in this study were all readers, contrary to the popular view of computer games and reading in its conventional sense being antithetical. James' description of the plot of *Baldur's Gate* shows the interaction of these textual worlds:

The story line of *Baldur's Gate* places you as a fairly young person who has recently become aware that they are more than what they seem—this is classic medieval fantasy stuff. As an avid reader and writer of the stuff, I know this stuff backwards, so you realize somebody who's not, goes off, meets up with friends and decides to find out what is actually the secret of their heritage. And along with that, a whole series of nonstory-related deeds where you can go forward and take the castle, which isn't a major part of the game itself but it's something you can do if you're interested in it. And the story line ends up, boy discovers that he is the son of a god, which is very fantasy stuff, and then goes about trying to claim birthright through that.

All but Henry read or viewed related films or books alongside their game play—*Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, fantasy, and science fiction. James described himself as “a big reader,” coming from a bookish family, with a love of historical fiction (Christian Jacques and Bernard Cornwall) and of some medieval fantasies (“some of it's good, some of it's not”). Henry read, too, but unlike the others did not read fiction so much as books that would prepare him to take over the family business when he left school.

CONCLUSION

The new social studies of childhood point to the need for studies that explore young people's uses of technology: studies that "focus on the everyday spaces in and through which children's lives and identities are made and remade" and on the ways in which young people "utilize the material presence of technologies in their every day lives" (Holloway and Valentine 2000: 770). Online computer games immerse young people in highly complex and engaging worlds, worlds in which literacy and communicative practices are significantly reconfigured and extended by the contexts in which they occur. As textual practice, computer game-playing shares with other literacy occasions real-world social and cultural contexts and ideologies, purposes, and effects. Here, as elsewhere, literacy is purposeful, socially situated, and interwoven with issues of community, representation, and identity. Computer games provide a space to explore intersections such as these, in the new, charmed and largely uncharted territory of cyberspace.

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