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Layered Literacies

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Critical Thinking and Layered Understandings:

Book Clubs, Videogames, and Adolescent Learning

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Layering literacies in the classroom involves educators and students thinking expansively about the integration and application of digital and nondigital resources, including experiences and perspectives (Abrams, 2015). In this column, Carolyn Stufft examines how seven adolescent males integrated their videogame experiences into their YAL book club discussions, building upon Gerber's (2009) research that compared videogame and young adult literature (YAL) genres. More specifically, in "Videogames and YA Literature: Using Book Groups to Layer Literacies," Stufft suggests that traditional book clubs can become contemporary learning spaces when they hinge on interest-driven content. Further, adolescents can engage in critical evaluations of texts when they build upon their videogame experiences to interpret young adult literature.

As Stufft's work reveals, the adolescents in the after-school book club juxtaposed a range of literate experiences, from their reading of YAL to their videogame playing to their movie watching. The adolescents' conversations revealed a layering of literacies that supported expansive and critical understandings of YAL and their own learning experiences. Stufft's findings suggest that bridging traditional and contemporary practices may not be as onerous as some may think; in fact, many students already draw parallels between their experiences, and educators can use these rich conversations to help scaffold students' discussions and hone their critical thinking skills, all the while respecting and honoring students' literate experiences that extend beyond the book.

Videogames and YA Literature: Using Book Groups to Layer Literacies

by Carolyn J. Stufft

Seven male high school students sat around a table in the corner of their inner-city school's library to discuss the book *Game Slaves* by Gard Skinner (2014). These 10th- and 11th-grade students were members of an after-school videogame club, which included a book group that met every other week during the Spring 2014 semester; the students read two books, *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* (Bowden, 2009) and *Game Slaves*, and asked each other questions about the text. As a researcher, my role was to listen to and facilitate the book group's discussions when appropriate.

What emerged from the book group's discussion on that particular day was a conversation in which the students seamlessly moved between the YA book *Game Slaves* and their experiences with videogames and movies. The following is a direct transcript (all names are student-selected pseudonyms) that provides insight into the seven adolescents' literacy practices and meaning-making experiences:

Aditya: So, let's say if it was a game, if there was a game called *Game Slaves* and it was based on this book . . .

Mateo: No, I would not play it.

Diego: I would give it a chance, you know.

Mateo: No, it's one of those things that . . . it was poorly structured. The story was lacking details.

Deshi: I don't think it'd be bad. I just don't think it has the game play elements it would need.

Aditya: So, what is missing that would help turn the book into a game?

Mateo: Um, a better structure in the story because there's things still missing. One, we don't know what in the world all of those . . . those monsters that they're facing. We don't know the backstory about it.

Diego: Oh, yeah!

Mateo: It wasn't giving much detail other than everything looks like a basic barren desert inside the city.

Deshi: I feel like there was a lot of detail, in my opinion. Yeah, details of the outside world. I guess that's what I'm trying to say.

Mateo: I'd give it a four. Everything is in it, it's good, but it's still missing those parts we were talking about.

Aditya: Like story-wise?

Mateo: Yeah.

Deshi: Mm, I'd give it a three out of five. I think it has too many flaws for me to rate any higher. Just lack of details of the outside world, you know.

Aditya: Well, my rating would be uh, four because, uh, the story, I like the idea of how it has that detailed narration of action. Like, that tells me, okay, if it was made into a movie or a game, it'd be a pretty good one. But the bad thing is, that story of human, it's confusing, it's missing.

Deshi: Yeah, uh, it explains how the game world works but not the real-life world.

Book clubs and videogames? Indeed, the high school students analyzed two books, including story structure, details, and craft.

The Relevance of Book Clubs

The book club is not a new phenomenon. Following an established practice, teachers have employed book groups as an approach to teaching reading (Raphael & McMahon, 1994) and have used book groups within English language arts classes and across content areas to both engage students and support content learning (e.g., Long & Roessing, 2015). As students respond to texts within book groups, they have the ability not only to discuss books, but also to share their own interpretations of and reactions to each text. According to Louise Rosenblatt's (1978/1994) transactional theory, aesthetic reading involves attention being "centered directly on what he [the reader] is living through during his relationship with that particular text" (p. 25); engaging with a text, "the reader finds it necessary to construct the speaker, the author . . . as part of what he decodes from the text" (p. 20).

Rosenblatt's theory applies to other texts, including digital texts (Evans & Po, 2007) and videogames (e.g., Sanders, 2013), as readers actively construct meaning. When "a reader is successful in applying . . . genre-related strategies, the text will generally provide a satisfying aesthetic experience" (McEneaney, 2006, p. 362). For students who are gamers, the relationship with a given text may be influenced by personal experiences with videogames, as evidenced through the discussions with these seven high school gamers. When the students drew upon their gaming knowledge to interpret *Game Slaves*, they experienced personally relevant learning, as the "text comes alive for an actively engaged reader" and the student has "something worth discussing" above and beyond the content of a particular book (Galda, 2013, p. 12). Researchers and educators have showcased intersections between videogames and traditional literature (Abrams, 2009; Brinckerhoff, 2007; Gerber, 2009; Gerber & Price, 2011; Hidey, 2006; Steinkuehler & Squire, 2014); book groups provide another avenue for layering students' literacies.

Videogame book groups provide a space for students to layer literacies as part of their discussions, which may, in turn, provide a setting to share learning, such as students linking content from a history course to the historical setting of a videogame (Abrams, 2009), exploring science concepts through videogame play (Annetta et al., 2013), and using a videogame like *Portal 2* as part of English language arts, math, and technology education (Abrams & Russo, 2015). By offering a setting within which students can explore and discuss their gaming experiences, teachers may be able to help students develop a deeper understanding of more traditional texts (Beavis, 2012). In this sense, book groups provide a space for students to share gaming experiences and to refer to other media of interest as they interpret a YA text; the book group can act as a springboard for students to continue to learn both within and beyond school.

Layered literacies involve interest-driven movement between online and offline spaces as youth engage in multimodal meaning making within and between in-school and out-of-school spaces.

The transcript also suggests that the students related ideas from the YA book to their experiences with other forms of media, including movies and videogames. In fact, they engaged in the type of plot analysis that may be part of a traditional English classroom discussion. However, the students also extended such an analysis to include a range of literary elements, turning to other forms of media, including videogames, to explain their points. When they discussed *Game Slaves*, the adolescents' critiques varied as they mentioned backstory, action, setting, and videogame mechanics (i.e., the rules and/or design within a videogame that allow for interactivity between the player and the game; see Sicart [2008] for additional information). Mateo, for instance, focused on narrative details and a lack of backstory, while Deshi referred both to videogame interactivity and to setting. Aditya considered story elements related to action for movies, videogames, and books. As they analyzed *Game Slaves*, these high school students examined the text in relation to a variety of literary and videogame elements.

Layered literacies involve interest-driven movement between online and offline spaces as youth engage in multimodal meaning making within and between in-school and out-of-school spaces; layering literacies also involves iterative learning and practices that inform one another regardless of where they take place (Abrams, 2015). In other words, students' interests (such as videogames) help students discuss, connect, consider, and layer a variety of media as part of the meaning-making process. The students may perceive how a particular videogame setting relates to a passage in a book; students may then advance that analysis and compare both to a movie with a similar plot. What we see, then, is students moving seamlessly among in-school, out-of-school, online, and offline experiences. This type of learning and layering continues and cycles between and among the different forms of media. In the case of the seven youth in the after-school, teacher-sponsored videogame club, the learners engaged with various experiences, texts, and modalities as they understood YA literature through their videogaming experiences.

YA Literature and Videogames in Book Groups

As noted earlier, for the book group the students read *Assassin's Creed: Renaissance* and *Game Slaves*. The former directly corresponds with the *Assassin's Creed* videogame series (Ubisoft Entertainment, 2007), whereas the latter includes gaming terminology and characteristics but is not itself related to an existing videogame. The *Assassin's Creed* videogame series centers around the conflict between two opposing factions, the Knights Templar and the Assassin Order, with characters from the Assassin Order completing missions in adherence to the Assassin's Creed that guides their actions.

The YA text *Game Slaves* follows the lives of Team Phoenix, a group of in-game avatars consisting of Dakota, Mi, Reno, York, Jevo, and their leader Phoenix. The team faces battles together within their virtual world while observing the rules they are expected to follow. Dakota, however, does not accept the rules at face value and instead questions the *status quo*, leading to a seismic shift in perception for the other characters as they navigate and explore whether they are inside or outside a videogame. As one of the high school students described it, *Game Slaves* is about "taking real people and putting them in the Internet, basically."

Students began book-group discussions by comparing characters within the book and analyzing the setting; they also were quick to layer literacies and draw parallels between the book and other media, such as movies and videogames that had plots and actions similar to that of *Game Slaves*. Students even extended game-based understandings to critique the book. One teen suggested that the character Dakota could be considered part of a DLC (i.e., downloadable content) package, thereby applying videogame background knowledge to his interpretation of YA literature.

For these students, videogames served as texts in their own right, yet differed from traditional books. When discussing the characters and setting of *Game Slaves*, for instance, Mateo compared and contrasted the YA book to a videogame: "And it reminds me of [the] TimeSplitters [series] because in *TimeSplitters: Future Perfect*, it turns out all of the TimeSplitters are genetic [sic] mutated people and clones. They were. And see, they're all . . . they're all being made . . . for world conquering. And so, even though it's not the similar story, it's still the genetic mutation thing."

Mateo critiqued *Game Slaves* by saying that more description is needed for the portions of the plot that take place outside of a videogame setting: "Whenever they're in the game, they're fully detailed. I mean, I could even see all the skeletons and dogs. But when they're out of the game, they're, it's like, it lacks the rest of the details." Through comments like these, the students provided insight into ways they were able to visualize the parts of *Game Slaves* that are set within a videogame but needed additional details to better envision action that takes place in other settings within the book.

As they reflected on *Game Slaves*, the group members noticed similarities between the book and videogames such as *Fallout 3* (Bethesda Game Studios, 2008), *Borderlands* (Gearbox Software, 2009), *TimeSplitters* (Free Radical Design, 2000), *Left for Dead 2* (Valve Corporation, 2009), and *Call of Duty* (Infinity Ward, 2003). In each instance, students provided examples of characters, setting, or plot from *Games Slaves* that related to a videogame; that is, they were able to tie YA literature to videogames as part of a dialogue that flowed from experiences with traditional text to experiences with multimodal representations in other forms of media. In most cases, the students centered discussion of videogames on the literary elements within games that related to the YA text, rather than focusing discussion on an examination of game mechanics, which encompass tools and/or elements of a videogame "designed for interaction with the game state" (Sicart, 2008, par. 6).

Discussions of videogame narratives were more common than those of game mechanics that often addressed actions a player was able to execute within a game. However, understanding the relationship between traditional texts and the inner workings of a game that control what a player can do (e.g., game mechanics) reveals an application of deep thinking related to different forms of media. The following discussion provides an example of this type of critical analysis.

Deshi: Man, this [*Game Slaves*] is like *Fallout 3*.

Diego: Yeah, like *Borderlands* and *Call of Duty* somehow.

Deshi: They had the post-apocalyptic feel.

Jonas: It reminds me of a game called *Left for Dead 2*.

Carlos: Why?

Jonas: 'Cause they explained the zombie part, and that made me think that this is similar.

Diego: Yeah, okay, and well like in *Borderlands,* the characters you fight, the enemies are kinda like they're . . . they're smart because they're like you, like they have really good aim and stuff. These characters [in *Game Slaves*] remind me of those, 'cause you know how they acted and like they're there; you know how in *Borderlands 2* like the enemies they can like speak to you. Like talking to them, it's cool. They had a lot of things to say.

Deshi: I would say *Fallout*, in terms of setting, of people surviving.

Diego: The setting is like this story setting.

In Diego's above remarks, game mechanics, such as the abilities ascribed to characters within a videogame

(e.g., intelligence and good aim with weapons) were central to his discussion of the book *Game Slaves*. While Diego considered the setting and characters in *Game Slaves,* his comparison was based on an analysis of the game mechanics, specifically those related to characters' qualities and behaviors inherent in *Borderlands*; in the same way that the videogame *Borderlands* is designed with characters who are smart and skilled with weapons, so too do the characters in the YA text *Game Slaves* have these attributes. Diego's comment is noteworthy because his comparison moves beyond consideration of literary features, such as plot, to instead compare the YA text and a videogame based on the rules of interactivity within the game. This type of comparison shows how layering goes beyond a focus on plot, setting, or characters; it can include game elements within traditional English language arts discussions. In fact, students prompted one another to expand their thinking and provide evidence to support their thoughts. Additionally, the way students moved between videogames and *Game Slaves*, using videogames as a guide to critique literary elements within a text, suggests that the students were not only accustomed to critiquing videogames, but also were reading and thinking critically about the YA book.

By validating students' experiences and expertise with videogame play, teachers are able to create spaces within the classroom for students to share these experiences and to hook background knowledge from videogames with content from literature being read and discussed in school.

Mateo continued his critique of *Game Slaves* and its perceived lack of details by stating, "Well, they, there's always a backstory [in videogames]." Deshi responded, "In *Fallout*, cause in *Fallout* you can make your own character and make your own story." Diego emphasized the way that videogames as texts differ from books by adding, "I was thinking in the videogames, it's more visualized, you know. And this one's [*Game Slaves*], like, you know, you gotta write it down." The students continued to compare *Game Slaves* to videogames, based on their experiences with both types of text, through observations that highlighted the critical connections they made across content areas. Additionally, students' conversation showcased the ways in which they were literate beyond the traditional text of *Game Slaves*, such as their consideration of the rule systems of videogames and the ways they relate to a YA text. For the book group students, experiences with and expectations of videogames clearly impacted their reactions to and interpretation of the YA text.

Classroom Applications

One way that teachers can incorporate videogames as an entryway for students to layer literacies as part of their learning is through the inclusion of videogame-related books as options for literature circles or book groups. The adolescents in my book group reported that they enjoyed both books but preferred the videogame book. By validating students' experiences and expertise with videogame play, teachers are able to create spaces within the classroom for students to share these experiences and to hook background knowledge from videogames with content from literature being read and discussed in school. In this way, videogames serve as an entryway for students' participation in literature discussions.

Teachers should recognize that student-led book groups can serve as a catalyst for teens to layer literacies as they combine discussions of various media—from books to videogames—using different modes to mediate their understandings of diverse texts. As Gerber (2009) contended, within the classroom, students can examine how iconography (e.g., symbols, game art, and icons) exists across videogames and YAL. Thus, teachers can structure book groups in ways that allow students to naturally layer literacies. For example, each book group could have access to an Internet-enabled device to participate in a weekly classroom TweetChat conversation with other book groups. Teachers could also consider using prompts, such as the ones included in Figure 1, to support book club discussions.

When videogames and other media have a place within book groups, discussion extends beyond the book to include students' experiences and interests with other forms of media. In book groups, students "learn not just from the characters but also from each

- Can you think of a videogame or movie that has a setting similar to the one in this book?
- Which of the characters in your book is similar to a videogame character? What do they share in common? What dissimilarities do they have?
- Choose a character from your book—what would this character Tweet if he/she had a Twitter account?
- What changes would you make to the text if you were going to turn this book into a videogame? Into a movie?
- In what ways would you extend the backstory of this book?
- Create a character profile, including strengths or special skills, for one of the characters from your book. How would you describe this character's abilities?
- What would an in-game map include or represent at this point in the book? How would the mechanics of the game allow a character to move around and throughout this map?

Figure 1. Examples of book group prompts to support students in layering literacies

other" (Polleck, 2010, pp. 65–66). By incorporating videogames as part of YAL discussions, teachers can transform book groups into spaces within which students layer literacies and consider relevant combinations and interpretations of meaning when they incorporate different forms of media and analyze, critique, and respond to books. Students can draw from this knowledge when reading books and considering narrative elements within their reading. They can use their videogame experience both to connect with books and to critique characters, setting, and plot within books. In these ways, students may engage in critical thinking, such as when they compare the setting from a book with that of a videogame; however, they may need additional guidance from teachers to help them expand their insights and understandings when considering game mechanics/rule systems for videogame interactivity.

The previous conversation in which Jonas linked the setting of *Games Slaves* with that of *Left for Dead 2* provides an example of a student drawing from videogame knowledge to discuss a literary element within a book. In that same conversation, Diego related characters in the book to those in *Borderlands 2,* noting the qualities of the characters, such as having good aim; however, Diego did not pursue this comparison further. Instead, the conversation moved back to comparing the setting between videogames and the YAL book, indicating that the students may have benefitted from a teacher or peer to help them develop their understanding of the book in light of their videogames (and vice versa).

The teacher's role in this case would be to scaffold students' awareness of the ways in which a variety of features of different media, such as the rules of interactivity of videogames, can be used as part of a critical analysis of text. More broadly, with educators' encouragement, students can consider aspects of literacy beyond traditional printed text. Teachers are able to facilitate students' creative and critical thinking and to encourage myriad connections as students layer literacies in the classroom. In terms of adolescent literacies, the inclusion of videogames is a powerful way not only to engage students in media of interest to them but to promote literacy development by fostering connections between videogames and books and by supporting students' critical analysis of the different forms of media that are present in their lives.

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