Chapter XV
Video Games, Reading, and Transmedial Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

In this qualitative study, literacy practices of "struggling" seventh and eighth graders were recorded on videotape as they engaged in both traditional and new literacies practices in an after-school video games club. These recordings were analyzed in the context of building comprehension skills with video games. The students struggled with reading and are characterized as unmotivated and disengaged by the school, which may be at the root of their inability to use comprehension strategies. Playing video games is viewed here as a literate practice, and was seen to be more engaging than traditional activities (such as reading school text, writing journals, etc.). The conclusion of this observation makes connections to current research in comprehension and provides a basis for teachers to use games to develop comprehension and learning.

INTRODUCTION

Games are designed to be accessible and can be used to develop print-based comprehension in reluctant and struggling readers. The goal of this chapter was to help make those connections clear, and demonstrate the need for this approach through observations of an after-school video game club where game-play was examined from a theory of comprehension and then examined in a non-laboratory context from the perspective of cultural cognition, often known as cognitive ethnography (Hutchins, 1995).

The after-school games club was created for the enrichment of students who had been pulled from mainstream classroom instruction to help them become more successful readers with comprehension strategies. Two videotaped sessions of the games club were analyzed in the context of games being new narratives that depend upon comprehension processes.

Comprehension is transmedial. It is not dependent upon a specific medium. It is a cognitive process that is an artifact of cultural and socially-mediated cognition. School and academia have their own cultures of cognition, and when we look at school, we need to remember that not everyone uses academic language or has experience with academic cultural values at home. Academic culture at school is another culture with a different language and different values for many people.

Comprehension translates across cultural boundaries based upon the way we share information. In its most basic sense, comprehension is pattern recognition, and this can be found in games, texts, dance, and whatever composed cultural communication and expression. The socio-cultural implications of the way these students approached games may be of assistance in helping educators to build upon informal learning to develop traditional academic learning.

With an understanding of this, we can begin to teach for transfer and recruit prior experiences, and perhaps become strategic in our use of games for developing comprehension.

Comprehension in the Wild vs. Comprehension in School—the Problem Defined

Often we assume that once students enter the classroom, they are ready to learn and perform whatever we give them. This approach ignores the possibility that these students may have rich lives outside of classroom culture, where they solve problems and have their own cultural models that frame and develop cognitive competencies (Lee, 2007). In order to engage students, we may need to learn about their cultural activities and their values to make connections and create transfer. When it comes to learning, connecting to prior knowledge is essential.

Many young people do not know what they want in 10 years, but they know what they are interested in now. What this chapter has begun

to explore is how an after-school reading remediation program was modified into a games club curriculum that aligned with student interest to make reading instruction more like an activity the club members might engage in if they chose the activity. In this case, they did choose the activity, and we worked to create connections and transfer. This choice empowered the students rather than alienating them with threats that they would never go to college if they did not pass a reading test. So we encouraged them to play video games since that is what they wanted to do.

We decided that games could provide a connection to the types of literate activities that kids might be participating away from the classroom environment. The foundation of the approach in the "Games Club" was to tap into activities that he kids wanted to participate in and make connections, and build upon their strengths and interests. This connection to the life of students outside of school, or in the wild, might begin to make school more relevant and possibly aid in our attempt to connect them to traditional academic culture, while also acknowledging that what they do outside of school is valuable too. According to O'Brien and Dubbels (submitted, page 3):

Reading is more unlike the reading students are doing outside of school than at any point in the recent history of secondary schools, and high stakes, print-based assessments are tapping skills and strategies that are increasingly unlike those that adolescents use from day to day.

The connection could build a portal to showing how school learning could help the students in their interest areas. What we wanted to move away from was strategies instruction or direct instruction about how to read. Many students have shown themselves to be tenacious in their reluctance to participate in this kind of instruction.

And for good reason, strategies instruction may condition students to look outside of themselves for answers, rather than using the knowledge

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