Chapter XLV
Intertextuality in Massively Multi-Player Online Games

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes the manner in which gamers engage in multiple text comprehension and intertextual practices within the context of the World of Warcraft (WOW). It describes the nature of and issues associated with multiple text comprehension in a knowledge-based society, intertextuality as it relates to massively multi-player online games, and grounds this discussion in survey results from 745 WOW players. This context is highly complex, rich in information, and supports multiple modes of communication. The literacy skills used by gamers in this environment provide us with a more complete understanding of multiple text comprehension overall and within similar complex environments. The authors hope that the chapter will provide valuable insights into the development and application of 21st century skills and help direct the design of future games and the implementation of games in education.

INTRODUCTION

There is little dispute that technology has become ubiquitous in our day-to-day lives. We shop online, receive news on mobile phones, communicate via text and video, take digital photos, make movies, and more. While these technologies have afforded new opportunities to increase efficiency and expand the notion of global citizenship, they have also caused many researchers and educators

to rethink what and how we should be teaching students in this post-typographic world (Leu & Kinzer, 2000). These new and ever evolving technologies require students to develop skills and strategies in addition to those previously required (Kozma, 1991). Citizens in the 21st century must not only know how to decode and comprehend information as they have in the past, but are also now responsible for efficiently and effectively finding and evaluating information as well as quickly adapting goals in response to the varied structures and complexities of the environment (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Dieberger, 1997; Grabinger, Dunlap, & Duffield, 1997; Lazar, 2003).

Research has indicated that the process can be a daunting task, particularly for individuals with low domain knowledge, interest, or motivation (Lawless & Kulikowich, 1996, 1998). Unfortunately, our understanding of these skills in contemporary, information rich environments is extremely limited (Coiro, 2003; Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2007; Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004). This is particularly true of formal educational environments that typically focus on basic literacy skills rather than the complex skills that are necessary in today's marketplace (Gee, 2006; Harrison, 2006). However, members of various virtual communities around the globe have demonstrated the application of these skills within informal environments, like the *World of Warcraft* (WoW). These players locate, evaluate, and apply information linked to WoW while simultaneously burdened by the challenges associated with play (e.g., navigation, communication, etc.). Understanding how these skills develop and what strategies players use to understand multiple texts will be valuable for educators and designers in the future.

MULTIPLE TEXT COMPREHENSION

In order for readers to understand multiple texts and draw connections across them, they must first be able to understand individual texts. The skills associated with understanding text in an information society are complex and based, in part, in the manner in which readers interact with texts. Historical models have described reading and literacy in a variety of ways, from a set of basic skills to a highly complex and inherently social process (see Alexander & Fox, 2004). Most models along this spectrum vary primarily in their underlying assumptions about meaning (e.g., existence, location, construction, etc.) and have been the source of great debate.

Early definitions of reading presumed that meaning existed and was inherent to a text. Reading was therefore a skill-based process in which the reader was responsible for "getting the author's message" (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Leu & Kinzer, 2003). From this viewpoint, reading was reduced to a mechanical process in which the reader applied decoding skills to infer meaning and reading instruction involved training skills (e.g., phonics instruction) (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Leu & Kinzer, 2003). By contrast, more contemporary views describe meaning as being informed by the social, cultural, and personal histories of the reader. Models of reading based on this assumption describe it as a constructive, interactive, and socially cued process (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Leu & Kinzer, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994; Ruddell & Unrau, 2004; Shanahan, 1990). This latter perspective depicts the reader as an interactive member of the reading process, rather than a recipient of information (Leu & Kinzer, 2000; Rosenblatt, 1994).

Collectively, contemporary theorists define reading and comprehension as a rich process that involves the reader's experiences, the author's intent, and the context in which reading takes place (Leu & Kinzer, 2003; RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). However, digital texts (e.g., hypertexts) differ from traditional texts in a number of ways (Kim & Kamil, 2003). For example, traditional texts are predominantly linear in their structure. By contrast, digital texts are inherently