Chapter 9
Game Literacy:
Assessing its Value for Both Classification and Public Perceptions of Games in aNew Zealand Context

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ABSTRACT

Game playing is made possible by players' engagement in configurative practices that work in conjunction with interpretive practices, referring to how a viewer's semiotic work on the text (when reading and interpreting it) is taken directly from the semiotic resources that are put to use and made available by the text itself. That is, games are dynamic entities that remain 'in potentia' until actualised by the player. In doing so, the player is involved in recursive actions that produce polysemic performances and readings. The literacy demands of games support the argument that it is a 'mistake' to consider that [they] offer only one type of experience and foster one type of engagement (Newman, 2002). Yet, when applied to the processes of media regulation and classifying game content (which guides the general publics' understanding of games), the competencies required to engage successfully with interactive texts fail to receive accurate representation or acknowledgment. This chapter addresses how the rise of new forms of literacy, has created a discrepancy between the literacy employed by digital natives when playing games and the way digital immigrants classify games by attributing greater meaning to the 'screen' as the major carrier of information. The central thesis of this chapter is to present an argument for classification processes to account for the contributions to knowledge from theory and research examining game based learning.

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INTRODUCTION

A great deal of attention is currently being lavished on identifying and promoting the learning principles involved in engaging with interactive games and its broader participatory culture. As a result new forms of cultural, technological and communicative competencies have been observed and outlined (Gee, 2003; Shaffer, 2007; Squire, 2005; Steinkuehler, 2006). Such work examines learning within an extremely diverse medium capable of offering players vastly different experiences and engagement with contemporary transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2004). Indeed, games constitute cultural artefacts that occupy a place in a broader cultural context that demands understanding of how they exploit different technological platforms, diverge amongst titles and genres and the degree and nature of the relationships they possess with other mediums. This chapter seeks to examine the extent to which the above factors contribute to the process of game regulation in a New Zealand context. This context-specific approach reflects the dialogue currently taking place between the academy and the government agency responsible for fulfilling censorship legislation in New Zealand, The Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC). At the heart of these discussions, is an argument for the need to acknowledge a broader range of scholarly discussions on games, including game based learning. In particular, the notion of game literacy that promotes how game players possess more developed message analysis and interpretation skills than has previously been acknowledged. This perspective on users of interactive games currently fails to penetrate the process of game regulation, which in turn plays a crucial role in determining public perception and understanding of games. Theory and research advocating game based learning currently trails behind a more powerful and influential discourse that guides regulation of game content which promotes the idea that games require examination for their deterministic ability to foster anti-social behaviors and attitudes (Anderson & Bushman, 2001; Anderson & Dill, 2000; Gentile *et al.*, 2004).

The process of regulating game content characteristically entails administering a legally enforceable system of classification that assigns age-restriction labels for interactive games based upon its content. In doing so, it shares with approaches to 'game based learning' a fundamental interest in how games are *understood* by those who play (Zagal, 2008). Additionally, the process of game regulation in New Zealand is *informed by* public perception, attitudes and beliefs as it regularly monitors the social mores and taste boundaries of its population. This process often serves to validate the existing classification system, and therefore how the focus of public understanding is shaped by the classification systems' emphasis upon language, violence and sexual content. It is argued here that the manner in which the classification process is both fashioned and preserved (via commissioned research, discussed below) creates a de-stabilising force for the acknowledgment and effectiveness of theory and research that present gaming technologies as beneficial learning experiences. Absent from its processes is information on how knowledge is acquired *about* games within wider society. That is, to what degree are games critically and analytically engaged via play, or assessed using different criteria? Such an approach would serve to examine the underlying assumption associated with the concept of media regulation, that those who assess and judge the appropriateness of game content for younger generations of players (either in classifying or subsequent management of, and access to media content) possess a clearer understanding of the nature and function of games compared to sections of the population deemed either less savvy and/or more vulnerable.

For Gee (2003) literacy, as it is applied to games, not only entails the ability to decode and understand meanings with respect to the semiotic domain of games but also the ability to produce meanings. Likewise, Espen Aarseth (1997) has