

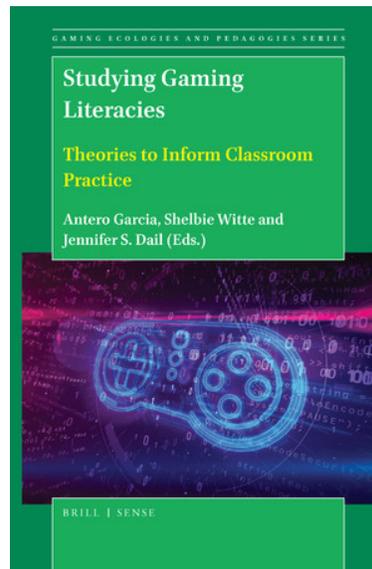
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Review of Studying Gaming Literacies: Theories to Inform Classroom Practice

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You're not pushing the games, but the technology of building simulated experiences where a person has a surrogate body and they enter that experience to see the world in a new way and use tools they've never seen and then come out and be able to work with other people, having the attitude to change the world.

- James Paul Gee (reviewed volume, p. 56)

INTRODUCTION

In my two years as a doctoral student in Language and Literacy Education (Capitalize: Language and Literacy Education or Department of Language and Literacy Education), I have assisted in the development of an augmented reality game to promote volunteerism in local communities and served as an instructor for an online summer camp in video game design. As an avid gamer myself, I do not believe one is ever qualified to make lasting, definitive remarks on the role gaming might play in education, fast-paced and ever-changing as modern tastes and technologies are. I do, however, believe the editors of *Studying Gaming Literacies: Theories to Inform Classroom Practice* have curated a worthwhile collection of chapters for educators finding themselves drawn to the idea that we might learn a thing or two from games, games which, not coincidentally, so many of today's youth lose (and find) themselves in.

The book, rather short at just over 100 pages, has a sister volume entitled *Playing with Teaching: Considerations for Implementing Gaming Literacies in the Classroom*, which provides further instructional considerations for the research shared in this volume. Whenever I found myself wishing for more practical applications, I had to remind myself that the project of *this* book was to take up the theory side of gaming in educational praxis. Indeed, the editors' introduction does a thorough

job of laying necessary theoretical groundwork: offering working definitions of "play" and "games," discussing their nested social nature, recognizing the toxic side of video game culture, as well as attending to current sociopolitical context(s) and the corresponding need to disrupt neoliberal regimes of standardization in schools.

Beyond the introduction, the rest of the book is organized into 2 parts: "Methodological Investigations in Literacies Research" (with 4 chapters) and "Playful Explorations" (with 3). I unpack these chapters individually below before concluding this review with my critical response.

Chapter 1: Inform, Perform, Transform: Modeling In-School Youth Participatory Action Research through Gameplay

The first chapter is an adapted reprint of an article originally published in 2012 by editor Antero Garcia. It unpacks his process creating a playful, investigative premise—"receiving cryptic messages from a guileless spider" (named Anansi) who lives in the walls of the school (p. 14)—to engage his students in Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). The ultimate aim here was to explore and advocate for the (very real) material improvement of their school.

The chapter author explains that engaging in YPAR requires a different educational paradigm than many teachers and students are used to, premised less on teacher-as-authoritative-keeper-of-knowledge and more on student as engaged, embodied inquirer. Touching on the three major phases of the process (inform, perform, and transform), he explains how his wholehearted investment into the project, alongside his students, allowed him to, in effect, "...liberate the classroom space and help weave webs for developing the critical agents within [his] classroom" (p. 20).

Chapter 2: How Youth Can Use Gaming as an Act of Creation

The second chapter explores the possibilities of play in an afterschool Maker’s space for underserved youth, such as experimental expression. The design of this specific Maker’s space centers around using “technology in creative rather than consumptive ways” (p. 32)—in this case, through pixel art and 3D modeling.

Much of the chapter details the kind of culture and pedagogical imperatives that drive the experimental and collaborative energy of these spaces, including a discussion of the layout of the space itself. The chapter concludes with implications for learning sites outside of this one: including recommendations for “(1) a non-hierarchical facilitation style, (2) authentic tools and practices, (3) collaboration, (4) interest-driven activity, and (5) choice” (p. 31).

Chapter 3: Digital Literacy Practices for a Gaming Generation: Commercial Gaming lessons from Adolescent Gamers

The authors in chapter 3 take up the challenge of conceiving popular video games, such as *World of Warcraft* and *Assassin’s Creed*, as meaningful pedagogical texts to critically explore broad topics related to gender, history, and popular culture. Zeroing in on adolescent boys who feel alienated by traditional school culture, the authors make the case that engaging in online and offline gaming cultures indeed fosters a multitude of complex, multimodal literacy practices that often go underappreciated in school settings.

In sharing “two samples of practical, game-based approaches,” the authors provide *Common Core* reading and writing standards that align with the ideas they describe (p. 39). One such activity invites

students to explore an immersive historical environment—in this case, renaissance Italy—in order to investigate the developers’ creative liberties, teasing apart fact from fiction. The authors also (importantly) take the time to consider some pedagogical concerns that may arise, including access to necessary technology, the financial resources to obtain it, as well as the fact that many of the games discussed are “inherently violent” (p. 41). Nevertheless, they contend that a certain degree of resource-scrambling and even risk may be necessary if educators are to authentically engage today’s youth in ways that are inherently meaningful to them.

Chapter 4: Literacies of Play: Blazing the Trail, Uncharted Territories and Hurrying Up - #TeamLaV’s Interview with James Paul Gee

The first section of the book concludes with excerpts of Mora et al.’s interview with James Paul Gee. Gee, an influential scholar and member of the New London Group, in his foundational text *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), sets the stage for the study of video games in literacy contexts in the 21st century.

In the interview, Gee discusses how the nascent field has developed over the last two decades, reflects on tensions of field-building around a practice traditionally associated with young people, and underscores the importance of games in the current political moment and our modern, high-stakes educational environment.

Chapter 5: Building Civic Literacy in the English Language Arts through Geospatial Play

Part 2 of the text, ‘Playful Explorations’, centers “what literacies research *explores, emphasizes, and elucidates* within gaming contexts” (p. 65).

The authors in Chapter 5 begin this section by exploring the possibilities of geospatial play—“play that blends the use of geospatial technology such as GPS/mapping technology with exploration of physical space” (p. 68)—and its implications for developing civic literacy in secondary ELA contexts.

Calling attention to the inherently political nature of new and developing technologies such as augmented and virtual realities, the authors emphasize the need for students to author digital content rather than passively consume it. They go on to propose activities premised on engaging students in interactive treasure hunts (not so different from geo-caching or playing *Pokémon Go*) and/or creating/documenting narratives about their communities. Ultimately, the authors suggest the potential affordance of this nascent technological capacity in fostering empathy and agency in contentious political times.

Chapter 6: Projective Worlds: Minecraft and MCAAlagaësia

Next, D’Aveta’s chapter considers the participatory practices of an online community investing significant time and energy in the full-scale construction of a virtual world (in Minecraft) based on Christopher Paolini’s fantasy world of Alagaësia (the setting for *The Inheritance Cycle*). Exploring this complex assemblage of mapmaking, young adult literature, technical expertise, fan culture, and collaborative imagining, the chapter works primarily through interviews to understand the meaning-making practices of this community (the majority of which have never met face to face). Building an extensive, communal online environment or “projective world” (p. 95) proves a powerful means of imaginative interrelation

between the author (Paolini) and his digitally-savvy readers.

Chapter 7: Literacy Practice and Play: Participatory Culture in the MMORPG, *FFXIV: A Realm Reborn*

In contrast to the previous chapter, the book’s final chapter explores the social dynamics of an online guild of players in an already-built virtual world. After an overview of the prevalence of gaming in teenagers’ lives and the extent to which adolescent identity is constructed and/or experimented with in online spaces, the author explores the experiences of adolescents who engage within the participatory culture of the massively-multiplayer online role playing game, *A Realm Reborn*. She does so by drawing on her own familiarity with the game and interacting with teenage players—both inside and outside of her guild—via online Reddit threads.

The complex strategizing processes and communal experience of being an authentic guild member leads the author to assert that, “prioritizing playful learning methodologies and fostering a participatory culture within our classrooms is crucial for achieving meaningful [educational] progress” (p. 107).

RESPONSE

Overall, the playful, yet scholarly, yet pragmatic nature of these chapters coheres into an intriguing set of ideas for thinking differently about literacy education. The engaging topics and overarching questions provided at the beginning of each chapter will keep readers both grounded and actively imagining possibilities.

While, again, I cannot speak for what may (or may not) be addressed in the accompanying sister volume to this text, I found myself wishing for a

more concerted critical take on attempts to “gamify” education, particularly in the wake of the decades-long aftermath of *No Child Left Behind* and the growing push to privatize education under market logics. The “game” of grades, class rank, and college admittance is not too far astray from *Fortnite*’s cutthroat ‘Battle Royale’ or *Super Smash Bros.*’ worldwide leaderboards at heart. It is important to keep these complexities in mind amid the current educational climate, both in the US and abroad. At the same time, to complicate the situation further, it is vital to keep in mind that “Youth culture needs to be tapped not co-opted” (Alvermann, 2012, p. 225), and that, when it comes to online mass media, “It is adolescents who curate, reinforce, and contribute most to these digital spaces and teachers may need to capitulate to the idea that they do not necessarily have the responsibility to teach them about their own worlds” (Fassbender, 2017, p. 266).

Beyond what may be missing here, my primary frustration with this collection, across chapters, was the relatively dated nature of many of the citations; the vast majority of references were from works published before 2016, and many well before that. For a topic as lively and dynamic as gaming, a volume published in 2020 should strive to be rigorously current. Instead, many of the allusions have already begun to feel somewhat dated. I certainly recognize that securing book deals, recruiting authors, reviewing entries, and readying production can easily take years. Still, as a doctoral student somewhat familiar with the field and eager to learn more, I had hoped the volume would be at the very forefront of current thinking.

Lastly, as much as I enjoyed them in isolation, a few chapters were premised on somewhat tenuous or undeveloped connections to gaming in any sort of strict sense. Other than framing discussions of technologies associated with hit games like *Pokémon Go* and *Minecraft*, chapters 5 and 6—which are really about embodied civic education and the collective mapping of a fantasy world—have little to do with what most typically think of when they think of games. Where, for example, is the “artificial conflict” (a key ingredient of games provided in the introduction) in critiquing real, geographical injustice and participating in the digital construction of a fantasy landscape? Perhaps unsurprisingly, “play” and “games” are often trendy buzzwords in social science and are often loosely operationalized as a result, which seems, at times, to be the case here. After all, if all forms of inquiry, exploration, and composition constitute gaming literacies, then the field is still too ill-defined to be meaningful. The topics in these chapters (of community exploration and cooperative imaginaries) are indeed important (vitaly so!) but seem a little pegged to fit in the context of this particular volume.

Quibbles aside, as a former high school English and Creative Writing teacher and current literacy scholar, I can easily endorse the suggestions and sentiments throughout this volume. We educators have work to do, and this volume makes important strides in loosening the reified soil to think and do otherwise in such a way that re-centers the novelty and joy of learning. This fact alone is reason enough to recommend this volume, especially to those who feel it might give them the necessary nudge to experiment with gaming literacies in their own contexts, whatever those might be.

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