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'Just Gaming': On Being *Differently* Literate
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> We are dealing with judgements that are not regulated by categories. I judge. But if I am asked by what criteria do I judge, I will have no answer to give. (Lyotard, 1985: 14)

This article is informed by three domains in which the ways that people attribute meaning to Grand Theft Auto 4 are articulated and discussed. The first is the body of academic writing about GTA as text / experience (see Jarvienen, 2003, Juul, 2005 and Barrett, 2006). The second is the online proliferation of gamer discourse in response to the game (see gtaforums.com; thatvideogameblog.com; gtagaming.com; fanfiction.net and grandtheftwiki). And the third is the emerging field of research into Game Literacy (Klimmt, 2009), itself a category of Media Literacy (Buckingham, 2003) and the manifestation of these in policy (OFCOM, 2009). Here we offer a dialogue between these strands of social practice by applying discourse analysis to a forum constructed for the empirical research (and thus, of course, coded by it) in order to give a more theorised voice to the player/ writer or - in our framing – the performer (Butler, 1990) in the context of critical literacy.

Our previous work (Kendall, 2008; McDougall and O'Brien, 2008) has illuminated the impact of media 2.0 (Gauntlett 2007) on young people's literacy identities and our data has been rich with the 'trace' of gaming and online participation as we have invited our research participants to express their pleasures and preferences and to 'play' a little at the boundaries of what it means to be 'properly literate' in order that we might explore the sometimes disorientating dislocations that they experience in different domains of practice (most particularly home/school). In our findings we have speculated on the drivers of their preferences;

> As readers of books they seemed to feel 'subject to' particular ways of being that encouraged an organised, linear response and deprived them of agency and choice, as players of games they felt licensed to be creative and innovative. As gamers they are perhaps more enabled to "accept risks, and choose possible future actions by anticipating outcomes" (Gauntlett, 2002: 98) behaviours that Gauntlett associates with Giddens (1991) notion of late modernity. As such it is interesting to conjecture as to whether the practice of gaming offers these students a more tentative, provisional reality within which the relationship between reader and text (player/game) is differently mediated so that the 'player as reader' of the 'game as text' is positioned as an agent in knowledge making practice rather than a recipient of 'knowledge'. (Kendall, 2008b:18)

This study takes this conjecture as its focus and attempts a more detailed study of the ways in which young adult Media students experience games and how they understand this activity in relation to other aspects of their literacy and learning lives,

particularly schooled cultures. It goes on to consider the relevance of this work to policy debates around media literacy.

Performance

Juul (2005) suggests that GTA exists 'between emergence and progression' and as such shares characteristics of multiple player online worlds such as World of Warcraft. This view resonates with Kyzywinska's (2007) reflections on her own identity-play in WoW and how she experiences the interplay of agency and limitation in the virtual world. For Juul, game design is fundamentally concerned with the facilitation of gameplay as a property of the game with emergent and thus unpredictable (and thus interesting) elements provided.

> The advantage of structuring a game like this is that the player experiences a predefined story by completing the missions, while having freedom to solve the tasks in different ways. Even though the player is free to ignore the missions, most players will try to complete them because they want to, because it is more interesting to undertake the missions that not to. (Juul, 2005: 82-3)

Jarvienen (2003) presents a model of simulation in GTAI drawing on Frasca's partly semiotic approach to game representation. For Jarvinen, games are actually more 'closed off' in terms of interpretation of what they represent, since the player has to understand and accept the rules which carry with them semiotic and representation of 'affordances'. Parody, a key representational device in the GTA franchise, presents ideological dilemmas:

> (GTA) … clearly operates in a particular domain of irony and parody with its retroish pop-sensibility….its particular blend of nostalgia and parody brings us back to the relationship of the underlying game system and its representation. Questions to ask of this particular game-simulation include: Does parody as a rhetorical technique reinforce what is parodies? … Do the manipulation rules and the causalities implemented through them into the game resist or invite this kind of interpretation? (Jarvienen, 2003: 10)

Again discussing the interplay of agency and limitation, progression and emergence, Barrett (2006) offers a more explicit 'take' on the interplay between performance and adoption of a representational construction in GTA:

> Videogames offer narratives that are formative in terms of individual and social understandings of race, youth and citizenship in the modern, neoliberal, globalized world. They allow players to step into a new identity and to 'perform' the world from the perspective of an 'other', so the way in which that world, as well as that 'other' is constructed, is extremely important. Questions such as what these games have to say about notions of agency, democratic participation, the role of public, democratic spheres and so forth are all essential to understanding how these games function as cultural, pedagogical machines. (2006: 96)

Barrett's contribution is compelling in its deconstruction of the neoliberal fantasy at work in GTA and how the conditions of possibility for the 'war on terror' are configured in the gameplay. In comparison to the more simplistic 'effects' responses to GTA, his analysis is complex and powerful in its taking Gee's rather evangelical

pedagogy-claims as a starting point, arguing that the 'content' of GTA must be scrutinised in way that Gee's focus on the 'how' of representation fails to address. However, Barrett's conception of 'what games have to say' is problematic in its failure to engage with players, who are spoken for in this reading of GTA as a text, as opposed to a cultural experience to which meaning is attributed through play.

'Literacy'/'Media Literacy'

In relating our findings to the emerging policy / practice agenda for Media Literacy in the UK context, we must clearly set out what we mean by this. In the UK, the regulatory body OFCOM, has given hitherto-absent credence to Media Education through the development of a Media Literacy strategy, created in collaboration with academics and industry professionals and disseminated through the convening of regional 'Media Literacy Task Force' groups. This national body liaises with European Media Literacy groups, UNESCO and, through International Media Literacy Research Seminars (at which we have presented our work) academics from New Zealand, the United States, Canada and Australia. Our sense that the Media Literacy agenda is fraught with confusion and a reluctance to adequately 'theorise' media literacy as literacy is twofold – firstly, the structural arrangement of the agenda by a regulatory body inevitably provides, intentionally or not, a protectionist agenda and secondly this protectionist impulse is amplified by the dialogue with international groups for whom such a 'risk reduction' approach is unproblematic and the assumed connection made to the recently published Byron report (Byron, 2009) which was a Government commissioned investigation into a 'problem' lacking a precise definition in which videogames and virtual world experiences were 'lumped together' with cyber-bullying and online paedophile grooming. The voices from research into how 'digital literacies' are developed from early ages – for example Marsh (2007) and Livingstone (2008) are insufficiently heard in the development of an overly 'pragmatic' agenda, as is evidenced by the framing statements of the research group made by Robin Blake (2008) as distributed on youtube. Our intention here, then, is to inform the Media Literacy agenda by offering data that might lead to a more discursive, complex and theoretically grounded phase of 'the project'.

Klimmt (2009) attempts a 'normative model' of game literacy and explicitly connects this to the emerging international Media Literacy agenda:

> While there is a broad consensus about the importance of preventing negative effects of game violence, other equally relevant dimensions of media literacy that competent gamers need to develop in order to meet the challenges implied by the recent developments of the digital game sector have received less attention.

According to Klimmt, these dimensions include the development of 'resilience' to effects, self-regulation of time spend and investment of energy in online gaming ('affordances') and the management of game time in relation to 'real-life tasks' ('inertia effects'). Whilst this intervention takes the debate forward by offering a more informed set of 'competences' exhibited by gamers (for example the management of 'social affordances'), its protectionist premise is undermined by a failure to engage with the relationship between 'coping' and performance and 'knowing' as a trait of criticality. Again, players lack a voice.

This article presents the outcomes of qualitative research undertaken with ten 16/17 year old players of Grand Theft Auto 4 who were recorded blogging about the gaming experience and then interviewed to elicit data about their perceptions of their performances and identity constructions in the narrative of GTA4 and in the online spaces provided by the game. It explores the multiplicity of their ways of telling (about *being*, in the game) in relation to poststructuralist theories of difference and in particular Lyotard's (1985) notion of 'gaming' – whereby the rules of literacy are always-already local, fluid, changing and contested. Drawing on approaches from critical discourse analysis the thoughts and reflections of the students in relation to what they think it means to read, and be a reader and to play and be a player are witnessed. In mobilizing a discussion of performative identity in and around the gameplay, we draw on Butler:

> The limits of the discursive analysis of gender presuppose and preempt the possibilities of imaginable and realizable gender configurations within culture. These limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender. (1990: 12)

> That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality. (1990: 185):

In Just Gaming (1985), Lyotard discusses the conditions of possibility for an ethics of multiplicity, developing a judgmental politics from the notion of the 'differend' contextualized in an understanding of the postmodern as a way of thinking difference (as opposed to a temporal conception). Benjamin (1992) paraphrases the paradox thus:

> The Idea of justice becomes, in a somewhat convenient linguistic turn, the 'multiplicity of justices' (rules) of each game and the 'justice of their multiplicity'….. the multiplicity of justices (rules) must always depend on the regulative Idea of justice and resist it as itself totalizing. The Idea is thus always already in conflict with the generalized justice which it wants to articulate. (1992: 61).

The paradox is that, for Lyotard, theory obliges us to question even the idea of a principle of multiplicity. The emerging semiotic domain of 'Media Literacy' (Buckingham, 2003:39) must attend to - and is yet constrained to delimit - the ethics of bearing witness to different ways of being literate in the context of the paradox of the idea of always-already 'original' literacy as a presence which 'new' or 'different' rules must always already operate in a proximal relation to.

Our working understanding of 'literacy' is always already under erasure and signified by the plural 'literacies' which brings together social practice models that see literacy as local, "historically situated…frequently changing" so that "some literacies become more dominant, visible and influential than others" and "patterned by social institutions and power relationships" (Barton and Hamilton,1998:7) with poststructuralist theories of difference in particular Lyotard's (1985) notion of 'gaming' and Maclure's (2006) 'posture' of 'frivolity'.

This fusion allows us to notice the kinds of disconnects Tyner (1998) and Bean (1999) draw our attention to between the kinds of literacies taught through schooled systems and the kinds of literacy people are engaged in when they access new media forms. 'Adult cultures' may often dismiss forms of new media literacy such as texting, social networking and gaming as being 'illegitimate' forms of textual practice, as Kendall's work (2008) elsewhere shows us. Equally, we acknowledge that young people's textual ecology is founded on plurality, relativism and hybridity. Mackey's longitudinal evidence base shows that:

> …young people moved easily within their own textual universe, giving meanings to texts across media and resisting value judgements about one text versus another, preferring to specify that one text would suit one social setting while another might work better in a different environment, clearly happy with multiplicity and often not willing to opt for a singular choice. (2002:17).

In relation to ideas in the public domain about the uses of literacy (Hoggart 1961) Tyner, Mackey and other notable contributors (Barton and Hamilton, 1998; Gee 2003; Gauntlett, 2007; Buckingham, 2007; Green and Hannon, 2007; Hartley 2008) spend little if any time discussing whether people are 'more' or 'less' literate as a result of their immersion in virtual and / or networked worlds. Instead they agree that they are differently literate.

Gee (2003), Peim (1993) and Lilis (2001) among many others have extended this thinking to the discussion of pedagogical practice and a consideration of how notions of multiple literacies might inform ways of thinking and being within educational contexts and a shift towards re-situating practices is at least theoretically imagined. However the recent thrust of 'Media Literacy' policy seems to have drawn little from these debates.

UNESCO (Moore, 2008:6) defines Media / Information Literacy as "*a teaching and learning process and application of critical thinking to receiving and producing mass communication media*". In all policy and agenda-setting texts relating to Media Literacy the word *critical* recurs and thus a distinction is drawn between the media literate (critical) citizen and the deficient uncritical 'other'. A theorised, evidenced discussion of critical thinking is lacking in these documents and their subsequent manifestations in curriculum, where assessment criteria often require professionals to make judgements about students' ability to 'be critical'.

In the United Kingdom there has been a policy shift toward the development of Media Literacy with a number of variant discourses in circulation. The regulatory body OFCOM, working with academics and industry, offer a definition that seeks to offer protection to the child and young adult in the new 'digital world', with particular concern for safety in social network sites and in videogame worlds, as articulated in the Government commissioned Byron report, 2008 and in keeping with Klimmt's work, discussed above, and also to define a set of competences in relation to both information filtering and creative practices. Media education, as we have discussed elsewhere (McDougall, 2006) is offered legitimacy by such a policy turn but find itself in a state of confusion amidst this duality of protectionist and emancipatory statements. What is lacking, it seems, is an adequately theorised dialogue between research into media literacy as social practice and the development of new 'moves'

in curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. This paper seeks to contribute to an evidence base to inform such interventions.

Method

This research was conducted in two stages. Eight 16-17 year olds were recruited to the project from two Further (tertiary) education colleges in England. The recruits, all male and following academic programmes in Media Studies that include the exploration and analysis of a broad range of 'textual products' including video game, were required to return signed parental consent forms to confirm that they had already purchased and were permitted to play *GTA4*. They then joined a Facebook group established exclusively for the project and were asked to submit regular playblog accounts, based on one hour gaming sessions, over a two week period. The only guidance provided was that they should write about their playing experiences in each case. They were free to respond to each other's postings, or to ignore them as they preferred. On several occasions reminder messages were sent to the whole group but these reminders did not include any prompts for content or structure. Individual students were never contacted and we did not comment on any postings.

The second stage was a half hour interview with each player, who were all asked the same questions but in each case their postings were referred to as a prompt – either directly with regard to the participant - for example, "*I noticed you gave an example of….*", or more general - "*towards the end of the two weeks the postings became more ……*". The rationale for the use of the Facebook group was threefold – firstly, using a web 2.0 context with which all the participants were already familiar would avoid some of the unfamiliar and awkward dynamics of this kind of research, secondly it would allow the participants to take responsibility for the nature of their own literacy practices and thirdly it would offer a 'transliteracy' bridge from playing to talking. To protect anonymity the names of the participants have been changed.

Playing and Telling

Ways of telling…

> Last night I began the story of Nico Bellic…(Bill)

Like many of our bloggers, Bill quickly settled into the role of 'story-teller', recounting dramatic tales of his adventures in Liberty City. Often postings were weaved together through the imposition of a loose, traditional, narrative thread with an 'opener':

> A long night in liberty city, it seems for Nico Bellic and his cousin Roman. After the mass bloodbath, which we created last night's wild antics at the splitsides comedy club in central liberty city, before the face off with police. (Justin)

… and a 'grand' finale' clearly gestured:

> So this is my last post, so i thought therefore i should go on a truely world class killing rampage...this is how I got on (Justin)

> I decided to go out with a bang. (Ben)

> OK, its here. The fifth and final hour, the big one…oh yes, you know what I'm talking about... (Sunny)

In the last of these examples Sunny feels the proximity of his onlookers and addresses 'us' directly. Similarly self-conscious of audience, Andy, perhaps our most accomplished story-teller, rejects the past-simple tense in favour of grammar that invites the reader very much into his 'present' and encourages us to experience his journey through Liberty City more immediately;

> I hit the gas and aim my car at there wreckage, when i hit full speed i leap out the vehicle and watch it carrear into the mess. With the remaining bullets i have i pump the gas tank full of lead and gaze at the explosions as one the flaming carcases of my enemies falls to my feet. (Andy)

The 'in-between' action was for Ben and Justin and their fellow bloggers a fast-paced pastiche on the 'action-movie' genre, a melodrama of "mass bloodbath"s (Justin), "killing sprees" (Justin & Dean), "guns blazing" (Andy) and "mini riots" (Ben), the writers taking up - and savouring - the position of the excessive action hero 'posturing' at the centre of the narrative - unnerved, amoral, fearless and bloodthirsty:

> I decided to do the impossible spawn a bike on the top of the building and try the craziest jump i have ever performed on the game… (Justin)

> I convinently snatch a women out of her car and when the male passenger challeges my antics i make him run by pointing a gun at him and then shoot the back of his knees making him slide across the pavement. I then approach him like a stereotypical russian gangster and stand over him whinning and put him out of his misery with a single head shot (oh so delightful!!). (Dean)

And there were moments of mock-chilling detail resonant of the Tarantino oeuvre:

> I thort I would change my clothes for a killing spree a nice new suit. black with a red tie (Simon).

There is something of the cartoonish 'baroque showman' about these descriptions. They are self-conscious, outrageous, carnivalesque 'performances' to the wider blog community, an overlay of friends, college peers and facebook contact trails:

> …before I posted my first blog I did read what everyone else had written and I tried to write in my own style, I did kind of stick to the same structure as other people (Ben);

> I tried to stick to my own sort of style of writing an keep it sort of close to that but I noticed a few of the blogs were out there (Dean).

And of course to 'us' - the researchers (outsiders?) - not blogging but palpably listening to these wild adventures played out vicariously. Telling the story of playing

for these participants is an act of 'playful artistry', as Dean summarises in his interview:

> I think to a certain extent there was a kind of competition because everybody wants their blog to be read and everyone wants people to laugh at their blog and they just want a chance to shine.

This is at its most explicit when the gamers tell of 'performing' against others in the multi-player online modes. Here is Dean again pitted against a group of American gamers:

> However I was subjected to being in a team of 4 with 3 Americans who were useless at the game but talked like they were professors of super bowl. This resulted on us arguing about what's better rugby and American football after them saying rugby is a girl's sport in which I jumped out the car and sent 4 single bullets into the windscreen and windows hoping they change their thoughts on rugby (Dean)

> After shooting a few people down and evading various 1/2 wanted star levels, I get an invite to play online, fun. With the invite accepted I found myself in a lobby full of rowdy americans wanting to kill me (in the game of course), the game mode is GTA Race meaning you race but can get out of your car at any point, picking up weapons along your way. Just as the game started I heard an overly-enthused american shout the words, "Holy shit, here we go! (Bill).

This more immediate, 'live' audience offers both Bill and Dean the opportunity to perform their 'gaming-selves'.

'Gaming selves'

This version of the 'macho' male protagonist the bloggers 'play' out for us is, they suggested in their interviews, remote from their everyday sense and expression of self, agency and the 'real'. Rather than the projection of any deeper aspiration they described *GTA4* as:

> a fun thing to play with no restrictions. It's just like a different world really which makes it fun and interesting to play (Andy);

> a sick and twisted fantasy really and it's down to the human psychic really. People wouldn't actually go out and, get in a car and run over thirty people and jump out and it on the body and do things like that" (Sunny).

This is contrasted with 'real life' where:

> running away from the police often ends with you getting caught in real life. Somehow you can end up like having a helicopter following you and just magically happen to have a grenade launcher which can blow up the helicopter so that things are great. I could never imagine doing that in real life. At least I hope not! (Dean).

And this playing at the 'other' within the 'unreal' provides a source of enjoyment and pleasure:

What appeals to me about it? I think its just real light hearted fun and you can get a good laugh out of it even though its crime and its probably not morally correct, you know there's not really that much of a consequence you know? You just get to have a little bit of fun and have a little joke with your mates when you're playing it (Dean).

This playfulness is observable throughout the blogs which show a constant fracturing of the 'in-game' narrative with 'out of game' observations and critiques prompted, for example, by moments of intertextual signification, 'moral' compromise or technical novelty. So although some of our players described themselves as immersed in Nico's 'time'/'reality', for example:

I just put myself in the character. You are Nico (Justin)

and

I do get pretty involved when I play games and when I do get into the cover thing I dont actually notice myself kind of ducking into cover when I'm actually playing the game yes so you can get really involved and think that you are Nico (Sunny),

… the blog entries offer less 'resolved' narratives. Peppered by moments of internal, meta-aware commentary they play out instead a more complex plurality.

At times meta-awareness is prompted by a sense of 'wonder' at what's new. Here for example Justin describes his first encounter with an in-game 'sensation':

After collecting him, I then took my eastern uropean cousin for a drink in Blarneys irish pub, before a game of darts, where I participated in a sensation , which I have never discovered before on a video game, my character being drunk. Whilst walking around the beer garden of the pub I found another feature which makes GTA a favourite of mine , not just due to the reveloutionary aspects of gameplay, but the humour, as I chuckled to myself while reading a umbrella on one of the tables with a sign for a mock german beer, Pißwasser, GTA never ceases to amaze me, or to make me laugh. (Justin)

This intertextual moment adds a further fracturing layer. Luke shares a similar moment of surprise, enjoyment and reflection as he marvels at the incidental but closely observed, and to him fascinating detail of the animated cup:

One particluar sad thing to do is knock a cup out of someones hand on a hill and watch the cup gain momentum and speed down the hill, a tribute to the physics engine (Luke).

… as does Dean when he contemplates the introduction of 'consequences' which he seems to appreciate as a sort of 'maturation' of the *GTA* series:

Finally they have built in the concept of consequences into GTA. I had to step out and face the music…(Dean).

At other times it is an emotional - even moral - challenge that prompts critique, as Ben's tendency to acknowledge the innocence of his victims to a perhaps judgmental audience might suggest:

> Despite being briefly distracted by the lure of slaughtering innocent bystanders (Ben);

> I passed the time by climbing onto a high surface and taking pot shots at innocent civilians. (Ben)

Equally Justin's revoke in the codicil below - which seems to begin with a silent "don't worry" to his audience - perhaps indicates a gentle slippage from his otherwise bravado-fuelled narrative:

> I decide to leave him to his watery grave, (he will be fine next time i get wasted or busted, I hope!). (Justin)

However the moments of disruption are most apparent when the 'in game' male characters interact with female characters. It is at these moments that many of the bloggers express either a comedy bravado, like Justin, that plays to the blog audience:

> After this i was distracted by my in game relationship with the character michelle, like a real girlfriend she clearly only wanted to drain my patience aswell as my wallet (Justin)

… or a more self-conscious tentativeness, like Ben here, that may be more 'out of game':

> The date looked to be ending in disaster when the taxi drivers erratic driving upset her stomach, but she seemed to enjoy the burgers and I managed to get invited inside. (Ben)

> A hectic nights drinking led to me surprisngly leading Michelle back to her flat unscathed, although after my embarassing behaviour I didn't even ask to go inside. (Ben).

Ben is surprised by his success with 'in game' girlfriend Michelle as he 'manages' to get invited inside whilst his embarrassment at his behaviour in front of her would seem to play against the direction of the 'moral framework' of the game.

Just 'messin'

> Justice does not consist merely in the observance of the rules; as in all the games, it consists in working at the limits of what the rules permit; in order to invent new moves, perhaps new rules and therefore new games. (Lyotard, 1985: 100)

The participants shared an explicit and 'knowing' meta-awareness of how to play against the narrative or despite it, a frivolity and playfulness that resonates with Gauntlett's (2002) idea of the postmodern 'pick and mix' reader of gender

magazines. Such clearly understood 'parology' (Lyotard, 1985) – new moves in the game that disrupt orthodox analyses of 'effects' and of reading itself - are perhaps our most compelling evidence that there is no singular 'way of being' in a game:

> Having completed the game the other day, i dedided there wasnt much else to do, but to start the entire thing again. I completed the first few missions with no problem whatsoever, but then, probly out of impatience i started messing the missions up by just generally messing about on them, including punching the women in the face in "first date". After about half an hour i got bored and decided to load the completed file and just mess about for a while. this messing about included shootouts with the police, and doing some stunt jumps, a noteable one was jumping from one island to another, but doing a complete flip in the process; (Sunny)

> My gaming started in Party Mode with a few friends…as can imagine structured games take a while to start. We were basically doing nothing for half an hour just driving cars, motorbikes, helicopters and shooting each other. I did find an 'easter egg', the Statue of Happiness has a beating heart, wow, there is no way I would of found this if I wasn't crashing a helicopter around the statue trying to land it on the happy statue's head (Bill).

Maclure's notion of 'frivolity' offers a provocative lens through which to begin to make sense of the 'playing with'. Like many other aspects of gamers' experience described above such playfulness "threatens the serious business of establishing foundations, frames, boundaries, generalities or principles" (Maclure 200:1) that define the 'inside' and 'outside' of gaming and the different identities (sexualities, masculinities etc) that Media 2.0 'players' are facilitated to perform.

Flow and Learning

Our inclusion of videogames in the 'Media 2.0' intervention (absent from Gauntlett's set of examples) is based on their distinction from non-interactive stories, as most helpfully described by Csikszentmihalyi (1997) in terms of the 'own sakeness' of gaming and by Dovey and Kennedy (2006:102) here:

> Meaning generated by play is different to meaning generated by reading. To read is to create meaning cognitively in the encounter with the text. To play is to generate meaning, to express it through play. Play allows us to actively express meaning (to be part of your clan, to be a stealth assassin or princess rescuing plumber). By playing out these roles we are temporarily inhabiting an avatar that functions as part of the gameplay and offers consumers a point of entry in to the game world. Players clearly have interpretive responses to game worlds, and computer games in their wider circulation are clearly meaningful.

When comparing their literacy experiences in Liberty City with traditional reading practices, the participants did not (as the Media 2.0 thesis might assume) 'other' reading books but they were largely in agreement about the differences between these textual practices:

> It's more engaging and I find the time passes more quickly when I'm playing a video game than reading a book or watching a film. Not necessarily because it's

> more enjoyable but because you're constantly engaged in doing something and it's your choice with what you're doing…you're in control when playing a game. But I guess you make your own story…you could write a book about it…you could quite a good book I think. (Andrew)

> I would say it's quite a lot like a film although they do try and make it more interactive to sort of separate because in this game you can make decisions so you sort of feel more involved in the game so you have a say in what's going to happen. (Tom)

> You kind of make the story up as you go along against what they've already given you, you kind of add more and I think that's why everybody's experience is slightly different because some people want you to go and be the good guy and others just want you to be a monster (Dean)

> A linear story is easier to understand but if you have an open world, you are making the story, you feel more involved definitely because you're going to places, you're having to literally get out and travel to see those places so you're getting to learn the area. (Kevin)

The last of these examples shifts the focus of the question to compare different types of games, seeing GTA as a cultural product offering a linear narrative within a virtual space. Such a critical awareness of the plurality of what the game offers seems to connect with the notions of 'risk' and 'play' that we conjecture may make gaming so attractive to young adults, as Gee (2003) describes as crucial to both active and critical learning, asserting that gaming potentially offers both conditions. Gee identifies three key things that are "at stake" when we learn actively. Firstly that we "learn to experience (see, feel and operate on) the world in new ways"; secondly that "since domains are usually shared by groups of people who carry them on as distinctive social practices, we gain the potential to join this group, to become affiliated with such kinds of people (even though we may never see all of them, or any of them face to face)" and thirdly "we gain resources that prepare us for future learning and problem solving in the domain and, perhaps, more important, in related domains." (Gee, 2003: 23).

However active learning does not necessarily manifest *critical* learning, for critical learning to occur Gee proposes that an additional feature is needed:

> For learning to be critical as well as active, one additional feature is needed. The learner needs to learn not only how to understand and produce meanings in a particular semiotic domain, but, in addition, how to think about the domain at a "meta" level as a complex system of interrelated parts. The learner also needs to learn how to innovate in the domain – how to produce meanings that, while recognizable, are seen as somehow novel or unpredictable. (Gee, 2003:23)

The conditions of criticality Gee further argues are made possible through gaming as the player is 'licensed' within the domain, or social practice of gaming to take up a position as 'expert' and play at the margins of what is already possible or knowable to produce new meanings. The meaning of the game as 'text' becomes shape-able as well as knowable and the reader is re-situated to learn in relation to relationships and social justice. This aspect of Gee's occasionally evangelical celebration of games and learning is controversial (see Barrett, 2006, discussed above) in that it

deliberately ignores the issue of subject matter. How can a player of *GTA*, or *Call of Duty* or any other game with what looks like (from outside of its realisation in play) a dubious ideology be mobilised to learn in relation to social justice? Our research has attempted at least to ask this, through direct engagement with players and their 'retelling' of their experiences in such a volatile and contested cultural space. In Lyotard's 'politics', this gesture is to resist the attribution of the performances to a regulatory Idea (of literacy, or of competence) but instead to bear witness to the plurality of the ways of being (with others) in such literacy practices:

> Can there be a plurality of justices? Or is the idea of justice the idea of a plurality? That is not the same question. I truly believe that the question we now face is that of a plurality, the idea of a justice that would at the same time be that of a plurality, and it would be a plurality of language games. (Lyotard: 1985: 95).

Conclusion: towards a theorized media literacy

Whilst we have discovered no one way of being Nico, there are some shared storytelling conventions that are of interest to us in our wish to theorise Media Literacy, as follows:

Switching and Splicing – with the game, against or alongside the game. Players had different reasons for doing this, sometimes expressed as critical literacy about intertextual comparison, sometimes as a practice of multimodal variation – from the linear game as a personal challenge to the social pleasures of the online domain, sometimes as morality – to make use of cheats first to complete the game, then to return to do it honestly and sometimes as a shifting between the gaming experience and the desire to perform on the facebook blog (though participants never explicitly 'confessed' this showmanship in the interviews). Bloggers moved between the past and present and the diegetic game 'I' (Nico) and the detached, evaluative expert, expressing novelty, surprise, a critical 'take' on the flow of the game. They adopted multiple positions both in their approaches to play and in their recounting of their play. The narratology/ludology debate aside, what these bloggers are 'doing' with the game here is telling stories about their in-game experience that offer some insight into what they value and enjoy about playing.

Performance – bloggers evidently took pleasure in taking centre stage in these baroque performances and some further enjoyed the opportunity to re-tell their stories; sorting, selecting, editing and glossing their experiences for maximum reader impact. For these participants it seems that gaming offers an opportunity for performance and achievement but at the same time some reflection, with 'knowingness' as important to the performance as the events in the game.

Identity - whilst the content of GTA and the 'effects' debate that surrounds it is not our concern here and nor is the ideology of the game (if such a stable fixed entity were conceivable), the fact that all of our participants are male cannot be ignored. The blog postings in particular tended to share the conventions of the 'baroque showman' and whilst the absence of females (both from the research and from the majority of the gaming encounters) along with their circulation as 'other' appears to

reinforce conservative textual practices, it was clear from both the blogs and the interview expositions that a highly performed and playful 'male showing' was at work.

Reflection – the use of follow up interviews informed by the blog yielded interesting comparisons between these different modes of telling. In the interviews, the participants offered more reflective, sensitive contexts for their previous blogged performances.

Social practice in this emerging field, whether mobilised in research, curriculum or pedagogy must bear witness to forms of literacy as difference. In *Just Gaming*, Lyotard conceives of the ethical dimension of bearing witness to difference – a justice of multiplicity, itself an inevitable paradox (along with postmodernity). Hence, in keeping with Lyotard's ethics, we wish to offer a set of conclusions that resist reducing these multiple ways of reading *GTA4* to a set of competences or 'levels' of critical engagement with 'the text'. Instead we seek to bear witness to the various ways that the young men participating in our research attribute meaning to the game. In so doing we suggest that Media Literacy, as practiced in educational contexts, ought to be concerned with discovering and giving voice to such 'local practices' in reading, telling and meaning-making and in so doing without recourse to a principle of Literacy as a regulatory Idea.

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