Popular Culture, textual practice and identity: literacy and the new technologies in the middle years of schooling.

The changing nature of literacy, in the context of the new technologies, has far reaching implications for schools, students, curriculum and teachers. Government reports such as the DEETYA *Digital Rhetorics* (Lankshear et al. 1997) stress the unevenness with which digital literacies are taken up and supported in schools, and the need for frameworks and support for teachers in developing and implementing curriculum organised around technology and digital literacies. Durrant and Green (2000) describe 'a broad-based shift from print to digital electronics as the organising context for literate-textual practice and for learning and teaching' and a context in which 'more and different technologies....are increasingly deployed in working and playing with texts, in the practice of new and different literacies.' (Durrant and Green 200:89)

In this paper, I explore the specifics of what some of these 'new and different literacies' might be, in particular, what sorts of reading and writing practices engagement with the texts of the new technologies might entail. By focussing on students in the middle years, years 7 and 8 in Victoria, links between texts, reading and identity are also readily visible, in the intersections between new forms of textual practice and media culture, literacy and identity, that Durrant and Green (Durrant and Green 2000: 106) highlight as key challenges for teachers and for society.

A recognition of the role of popular culture in identity work for young people, and the implications of this for schooling and curriculum, is reflected in much research on youth culture and media literacy (eg Buckingham 1998, Sefton-Green 1998, Bloustein 2000). Haas Dyson's research with young children draws attention to the 'social and ideological processes undergirding children's use of media symbols - especially the superhero - as material for constructing textual and social worlds' (Haas Dyson 1997: 3). She explores the ways in which young children draw on popular culture as resources for both for 'learning to compose and learning to be a community participant' (1997:3); for mediating their relationships with others and their own stances and identities through the medium of 'author's theatre', where the children*'* made visible to me, the adult observer, the social and ideological possibilities and constraints of child composing as a mediational tool, as a means for learning to 'regulate their relations with each other'. (Haas Dyson 1997: 2-3)

Haas Dyson shows the ways popular culture, in a grade two classroom, weaves in and out of the children's worlds, linking literacy, identity and their relations and representations of self with and within the wider community. In this paper, I want to explore how older children, young people in the 'middle years' engage with electronic and other popular texts, and the implications of this engagement for literacy, identity and the curriculum. To do so, I draw on a project undertaken in two secondary schools by Noel Gough and myself in 1999 exploring the study of computer games in the English classroom. I also draw on materials collected by a student teacher and Secondary English teacher in 1998 and 2000 respectively. My focus is on literacy and the nature of textuality, both as exhibited in the texts themselves, and in students' writing and other forms of engagement with them, and on the ways in which schools need to take account of these intersections between media, technology and literacy in preparing students for the 'media-text and symbol- saturated environment' (Luke 1996) with which they will increasingly be called upon to occupy.

All textual practice, including reading, writing and discussion, engages questions of representation, negotiation and positioning - issues to do with how texts are read, and ask to

be read; with (re)presentation of self, with ideology and with identity. For students in the middle years such matters are particularly pressing.

In their out of school lives, computer games, websites, chatrooms and other forms of digital culture present dynamic and attractive worlds and possibilities, both textual and social; powerful resources for identity formation and pleasure and engagement of many kinds. Reading, writing and discussion which utilises or turns around popular culture mixes issues of literacy, ideology and identity, making all three available for study, as well as developing understandings of the nature of texts and engagement with them (reading) and of the production and mediation of self in this textual world.

There have been numerous explorations of the ways literacy is changing in the context of the new technologies, and the features of digital texts and literacies (eg Lemke 1996, Reinking 1998, Cope and Kalantzis 2000, Durrant and Green 2000, Lankshear, Bigum and Snyder with Green (2000). Common to most is an interest in the multimodal nature of the semiosis (Kress 1995, The New London Group 2000), and in the non-linear connectivity between between different textual elements. There is also a recognition of the importance of spatiality (Fuller and Jenkins 1995, Johnson-Eiola 1997, Cubitt1998), surfaces and intertextuality in redefined definitions of reading which incorporate viewing and playing, and an uneasy consciousness of the pressing dimensions of the location of both texts and technologies both within and as products of global commerce and marketting (Nixon 1998, Kenway and Fitzclarence (in press))

Big picture understandings of intersections between schooling, literacy and technology provide much-needed frameworks for conceptualising curriculum and 'retooling schooling' (Green and Bigum 1998); for rethinking the nature of literacy and the understandings students need. In this paper I look upwards from the other end, from the perspective of the individual student to ask what sorts of literacy practices are activated in relation to one form of media culture, the computer game.

Rivett (2000), in discussing web sites as emergent cultural forms, makes the point that in any critical textual analysis, attention to the form of texts as text, as 'aesthetic and cultural form' (Rivett 2000: 36) is as much needed as a focus on the 'content' of individual texts. In the case of computer games, older forms of narrative, symbolic resonances and intertexuality combine also with a reworking of other textual genres - a process Bolter and Grusin (2000) describe as 'remediation'. New media, they argue, 'remediate' older media forms, so that film, television, and the like are replicated in ways that seek both to erase and draw attention to their qualitities as remakings of earlier genre. In their reading and playing of computer games, young people are engaged with texts in both new and traditional ways. What kinds of knowledge, what understandings of narrative and genre, and what sorts of literacy practices does this entail?

Reading/Playing Computer Games

What sorts of reading knowledge, processes and strategies do young people draw on in playing computer games? I want to begin by looking at two groups of young people playing computer games in school, and talking their way through as they play. Both excerpts are taken from a year eight class, where computer games were incorporated into the English curriculum in a study undertaken by a group of secondary teachers, Noel Gough and myself in 1999.

The game playing sessions generated a wide range of more traditionally valued literacies. Students sat around tables on which one game on one screen was set up, and took turns to adopt different roles in their explorations and game playing. They worked in collaborative

and collegial fashion, giving directions, reading print and on screen words and symbols, taking notes, proposing strategies, arguing about the significance of different moves, responding to success and failure and the like. Exerpts from two discussions, one around a known and the other an unknown text show both the purposeful, problem solving nature of their engagement and language use, and the ways in which they utilise what they know of generic features of narrative and games to make sense of the world of the game.

Heroes of Might and Magic

In the first example, the students are playing a game they already know well*, (Heroes of Might and Magic 2)*, and their comments are given in response to my request for explanations as they play.

Sam: Okay, well what we have here is like these little characters and our town here, which we manage and where as other towns and wizards in the game kind of thing, and we have to build up an army and upgrade our weapons and stuff like that.

Stephen: You've got this horse and then you run around and you click on things

and then you can pick up jewels and stuff and then you go into battles. I lost one.

CB: Already?

Sam: Yes, already.

Stephen: This is our little town so far, and we build it to our little main things and

these little things build

Sam: Build a storm

Stephen: Only you can build a pyramid, it will produce money features and that's

what it takes, whatever that mineral is

CB: So that's what it's cost you

Stephen: Stone

Sam: Yes, yes it is, it is stone

Stephen: Now if you want to build an army [you need] monies

Sam: You go in there.

Stephen: Or you can buy four of them, they cost per trip 250 goldies

Sam: Then click on Max

CB: Is that like your account?

Sam: This is one of the creatures so far, because that was the little town and

when we have a hero in the town, the hero comes there, and show his creatures, you can exit at, this is like hand, we're fighting with you

What kinds of reading, what kinds of textual knowledge are in evidence here? The disconnected feeling of this exchange is a reflection of the juxtaposition of several foci (explaining the game, working from the screen, attending to different icons, playing the game, listening to me and to each other, identifying what I need to know), and presupposes the visual and auditory presence of the game on screen. The students' explanations of how the game is played combines their knowledge of narrative and of the fantasy genre (wizards, armies, jewels, towns, heroes) with procedural understandings about game playing (little characters, building up armies, upgrading weapons, clicking onto things, going into battles). They are simultaneously playing and explaining -demonstrating - as they would when inducting a new player into the game, referring back and forth between the screen, each other, the action on the screen and the need to explain. The onscreen visuals themselves require interpretation of many kinds - a split screen with a range of icons functioning symbolically within the narrative and game, so that there are multitextual and multidimensional references and relationships to be negotiated. By Sam's last description the game is well under way, so that his talk functions more as commentary than explanation. The pace of the game picks up, and the explanation becomes increasingly dependent and assumes greater knowledge on the part of the listener:

Stephen: There's some jewels there

Sam: These jewels are mine, this is another wizard over there, and he's just collecting a stone.

CB: So if he goes onto a place and you click that it means that you collect whatever is there?
Sam: Yeah

Stephen: And this guy's bad, that guy killed me.

Sam: We can go to this mine here, and then you all mine, 2 units for a day, like 30 of silver and over here, you can shift hands and stuff, I just went to battle and died, I just go into a battle and die, so you help the slayer, all our men are out of turns and have to end that.

Stephen: So then everyone else gets a turn.

Sam: So all the other players and computers now having their turn, and there's about 5 different computer players and then they find their castles and take them over

Stephen See, that's another one of our guys down there, that's ours too.

CB: So you're one side and there are many other opponents?
Sam: Yeah, there are eight or nine. Now that we've fought we've gotten their knowledge, so you can learn a skill like leadership, or eagle's eye, with that you can see further and that will let you govern your troops better.

Their knowledge of the game is complex and specific. This dense textual detail is a central feature of the game's composition and characteristic of popular culture built around imaginary worlds - computer games, *Warhammer*, *Magic Cards*, *Pokemon* and so on. Students are managing multiple layers of narrative and iconography, utilising and aligning themselves to different figures and their attributes and powers. Immersion in this detail is essential to play the game effectively, and is an important part of the pleasures and

satisfaction of playing, aligned with problem solving, battles, the accumulation of wealth and knowledge, physical and intellectual deftness and membership of the Heroes, or whatever, playing community. It links them into the seductive and well-resourced global network of multinational media culture and marketting.

Beyond Time

The example above shows students who have already learned how to play the game demonstrating/explaining it to an outsider. The resources and understandings being drawn upon are already well established in this context. By contrast, here is a group of students trying to move into a new game. They attempt to mobilise operational and cultural resources (Green 1988) developed elsewhere to make the game make sense. These students were trying to work out how to play *Beyond Time*, a time travels story set in the Egyptian past. To do so, they watched the movie clip with which most games in this genre begin, then moved between clicking on items and symbols that they found on screen and finding relevant sections of the print manual to read aloud. When symbols on screen provided information they wrote this down, and incorporated these notes into the mix of available resources for working out what to do. The game's box and manual were spread out on the table in front of them as they worked. They had been trying things out on and making notes for about ten minutes at this stage, and were getting quite frustrated.

CB: What are you looking for?
Ann: I'm not quite sure

CB: So you've moved into the past?
Ann: No, it's kind of like an archaeological dig and then you get involved in it...

CB: So what's happened do you think?
Ann: I'm not sure.

Zoe: We didn't do that before.

CB: So you've got three sets of hieroglyphics there and what you're doing now is the translation

Ann: The code for the door, you know that thing.

Michael: Just remember

Ann: A chicken, a staff,

CB: You remember those hieroglyphics?
Michael: Scarab

Zoe: That's a little beetle thing

CB: There's nothing about the picture on that

Michael: Strange

CB: Are you looking for a door?

Michael: We're looking for how to open the door

Zoe: The Isis chamber

Michael: Ha ha, that gold tower says here 'as part of the super of the Isis tower combination, there's more than one, we've got to look for more of these gold slips.

CB: Does that sound mean anything?

Michael: That's just a random sound that's played every so often.

Zoe: I need main points.

Michael: So, we've got one of the gold pieces. It says three, look for knowledge and wisdom; Sirrus commands the elements, take care for the way.

Ann: Take care of the dark

The students' main strategy for taking the game forward is to search for images and icons that have significance, either singly or collectively. How they read the text as genre is a good example of how technology changes familiar literacy forms. Where I read the game primarily as story, with my first questions concerned the narrative context and scenario, they had moved rapidly to regarding the game more as puzzle or problem than narrative. They are bringing similar strategies and knowledge to bear as did the *Heroes* group, knowledge about how to proceed, and about what to attend to, even though they are having limited success getting into the game. While they utilise a degree of contextual knowledge about Ancient Egypt, and have viewed the movie clip that sets the story in motion and provides the rationale, they have rapidly moved away from the storyline and are focussing almost exclusively on the nature of the on-screen world and on generic features of computer games. In doing so, they shift not just from print and verbal literacy forms, but also from many visual narrative expectations and conventions associated with television, film and video. Judy, their teacher, commented on the ways in which, while 'print mattered' a different kind of literacy came into play to support them here:

> I think it was interesting the extent to which print mattered, and the extent to which, when they entered into the game, if they were in it for the first time, [they needed to] think about deciding what is this world - that's not just *Beyond Time*. There's almost no-one who has played that before, and so they watched, there was a little movie clip at the beginning but it got boring and they have a certain amount of tolerance for that, and then they watch it for a certain amount, and then they started to try [to play]. I think they seemed quite intuitive, they have to be able to just click on things, and there's quite a long interval where you can't actually intervene, do anything, but very few of them go to the box to look at the back or anything. That seems very much an adult thing to do.

Collectively, these transcripts show a version of reading which incorporates but also departs from not just more traditional and linear print based processes, but also a number of visual narrative codes as well. It is multifaceted, collaborative and collegial. Like print reading, it is embedded in other literacy modes (speaking, listening, viewing, writing), and works with both traditional and new kinds of generic knowledge - knowledge of fantasy and mythological worlds, knowledge of narratives and problem solving, but knowledge also of how action is advanced in computer games. They work with icons and images that function symbolically, and have no difficulty with this often troublesome feature of print texts. They readily identify their own position in relation to the characters and to the 'aims' of the action and story line. This is purposeful and focussed engagement, which, where the game is familiar at least, is

also pleasurable and communal. In terms of Green et al.'s model of literacy as cultural, critical and operational, (Green 1988, Lankshear et al. 1997), cultural and operational knowledges are much in evidence as 'both context and resource' (Green 1999) for playing. The teaching context in which the game playing occurred, where students were to read/play at least two games with a view to finding similarities with the class novel, to presenting a review of a game and recasting the class novel as a game, provided the occasion for critical dimensions to be brought into play.

In terms of identity and a sense of community, some games were clearly more part of students' worlds than others, with closer links to peer groups and identity. Games like *Heroes*, or the card based version of *Magic Cards*, brought with them a pre-existent culture, rules and set of pleasures that bestowed status and satisfaction upon initiates. *Beyond Time*, by contrast, was rejected by the end of the third lesson as 'something your parents would want to play'.

Writing and Computer Games

Connections between computer games, literacy and identity also feature in written texts. Just as traditional reading strategies are expanded and reshaped in playing computer games, so written narratives too may be colonised and reformed. Game structures and conventions provide resources both for the construction of the narrative and for the representation of self which writing entails, where writing is viewed not just as text but as 'a design for text and subjectivity' (Kamler 1999). The two examples which follow did not arise from curriculum geared to computer games or popular culture, but in each instance were composed in response to more conventional writing tasks.

Rhys

Rhys' narrative was handed in to a student teacher who had given his year 7 students a proforma handout, which asked students to 'Think of a time, or imagine a time when you were really scared, when fear had absolutely gripped you. Describe the incident and how you felt throughout'. Computer games referred to in Rhys' story include *Doom 2*, a first person shooter game and *Small Soldiers* and *Command and Conquer: Red Alert*, both real time strategy games. *Small Soldiers* is also a movie, to which Rhys also refers.

> *This might be very disterbing to some readers. This story contains ultra-reality <u>war</u>. O.K, let's start. I was messing around in the shed looking at the mechanical stuff. I like inventing stuff. I put all these circuitry boards and all, I placed them in a bucket and put it on my head. A hollowgraphic screen came up. It had Doom 2, Small Soldiers and Command and Conquer Red Alert. I touched Doom 2. I zoomed into last stage, I know all guns and god mode. Cool... I placed a bomb on the master and BOOM! I got the vapouriser. Shot him a million times, that won't work. Pipe bomb! Threw a few and a boom a boom a boom. He's gone. Then I zapp to small soldiers. I was climbing the power box... Ahhhh I fell from the power box. I had 20 nails drilled through my back. I changed the settings then I turned into Tanya from Red Alert 2 Dual colt guns, Ha Haaa, let's Rock. The sounds of gun fire blew the box and the small soldiers. Like the movie the gorgonites lived. Then I zapped into world war 3*

TO BE CONTINUED

BABY!.....

Writing of this kind is very familiar to most teachers, although the specifics of the content will be different. The opening sentences of Rhys' story serve a number of purposes. They work to ironise both the set task and the narrative which follows, while also establishing the genre of 'violent' computer games. The piece in many ways enacts the experience of playing, in its amalgam of first and third person as 'I' moves from being an unnamed character/player 'messing around in the shed' to specific characters like 'Tanya from *Red Alert 2'*; in its slipping between levels and games, whereby the narrative proceeds as series of tableaux; in the power and relish with which weapons are fired and acquired; and in the range of experiences the narrator, and the reader, are subjected to. In its structure the piece echoes the format of computer games, as also in the wit, resourcefulness and gimmickry by which the character moves into and between levels and games. It closely approximates the experience of playing, and the intensity and immediacy of the pleasures gained. Shooting, zapping, falling, even being 'zapped' are exhilarating, but most exhilarating of all is the sense of agency and control, and the surefootedness with which the world of computer games is adduced.

The piece is indeed 'very disterbing to some readers'. Key questions concern the nature of representational violence, and the undeniable energy and accomplishment of the piece. Rhys is highly engaged, and this school task, appropriated to incorporate his out of school world, is indeed utilising the resources of popular culture in the service of conventional literacy. At the same time, it shows the infiltration of electronic literacies into more traditional narrative structures, and a recreation of that form. It also works, as Haas Dyson observed in the case of her grade 2 informants, to construct a version of self for both private and public spheres. Questions for teachers in the middle years particularly concern the degree to which such incorporation is welcome, given multiple concerns with alienation, literacy and ideology. As is generally the case when working with popular culture, there's a fine line to be walked between celebration and critique, between acknowledging students' pleasures in the text and supporting them to become more analytic and reflective with respect to them (Misson 1998, Buckingham 1998, Sefton-Green 1998). Texts like this provide sites for engaging all three dimensions of the operational-cultural-critical dimensions of literacy with students, and of moving in risky but essential territory of violence and masculinity where, as Alloway and Gilbert (1997) 'everything is dangerous'.

Ben

Ben's piece, with which I finish, is less confronting than Rhys' text, and has its origins in Nintendo rather than computer games. Like Ben's piece, however, it shows the same appropriation of the conventions of the genre, and the same capacity to engage and energise the writing, in this case in ways not otherwise available to the student more generally. Even more than Rhys' piece, Ben's story exemplifies the multimodal nature of the 'new' literacy, as production and design (Kress 1995) and the incorporation of generic elements that extend well beyond the two dimensional page.

Ben also in year 7, attends an outer suburbs Melbourne high school, and his story was given to me by his teacher, a graduate student, who knew of my interest in computer games. Ben was a student for whom writing was difficult, and spelling and handwriting considerable obstacles. Zink arose when his teacher asked the class to produce a 500 word story about an imaginary world. Students were given a black-backed, hard cover journal in which to write their story, and had several weeks to complete the task.

Ben was inspired by an earlier task, where his teacher had asked students to do a review of a game or a CD. Ben's review had been on the Nintendo game *Zelda*. Having done the review, Ben 'got an idea for how [he] could do it better'. *The Legend of Zink*concerns the 'Kokiri', 'the children of the forest', and is a long story in the fantasy genre. In its final

form, *Zink* was literally a multilayered and multimodal text; Ben drafted sections of his story each week before giving them to his teacher, Geoff, who would proof read them and give the corrected version back to Ben. Ben would then type them up, using a font appropriate to the fantasy genre. These segments were then pasted into the journal, literally superimposing printed computer text onto the blank manuscript pages of the book. Pasted again above these were Ben's coloured illustrations of key characters and locations. These were drawn separately, coloured, cut out and pasted in as fold outs, in the manner of children's picture books. The effect was to further break up the two dimensional nature of the text, both vertically and horizontally spreading beyond the boundaries of the page, turning composing into compos(it)ing (Green 1995), with text layering and composition incorporating elements of information technology.

In addition to the story, students were also required to produce a map, and an account of the people or creatures that lived in this imaginary world. Ben's map incorporated sites from a number of existing Nintendo games as well as some of his own creation, (maps and location being central features of most computer and Nintendo games). Ben coloured and labelled his map, outlining the features and inhabitants as required. To complete the map, and *The Legend of Zink*, Ben attached a computer disk to his final assignment, which had on it the music to accompany different sites. To do this he went to a range of websites associated with various games, downloaded and remixed them with his sister's help, so that each episode from the print story, imaginatively located on the map, would have its distinctive accompanying sound. Ben's image of his story, and of his teacher's reading of it, is of a multimodal montage of texts, entailing reading, listening and visual dimensions, and ranging across the print story, the fold out pictures, the map and the music, all in turn linking back to a range intertextual resonances to the Nintendo games and websites from which they derive.

Conclusions

So, what does all this mean? If literacy is changing, in the context of the new technologies, schools and teachers need to find ways to work productively with students to help them become critical users and producers of new texts and literacies. For students in the middle years particularly, disparities between home, school and 'real world' cultures and curriculum contribute directly to the alienation and disengagement that have immediate and material outcomes in the post-school and out-of-school world. Teachers need frameworks for reconceptualising literacy and curriculum that will both reflect and build on the digital literacies students have already acquired, and provide a context in which students in the middle years are able to reflect critically on issues of identity and power embedded in youth culture, and the role of digital and other popular culture texts in the construction of their own identities

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