education review
a journal of book reviews

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Thomas, Angela. (2007). *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age*. New York, New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Pp. viii + 242 $32 ISBN 978-0-8204-7854-8

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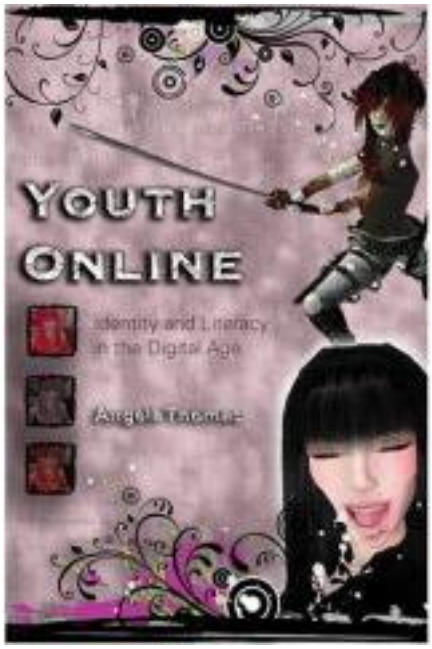
Reviewed May 11, 2008

In 1971, the first commercially sold, coin-operated videogame, *Computer Space*, appeared on college campuses around the nation ("Computer Space", n.d). It was not commercially successful, but was quickly followed by the first home videogame system, the Magnavox Console in 1972 ("Magnavox Odyssey", n.d.). This year also marked the appearance in arcades and living rooms of the first successful commercially sold game, *Pong* ("Pong", n.d.). From the moment these games and game systems appeared, the economic, social, and educational future of the United States and the world began to change. This change was fostered by Coleco, Bally, Atari, Sega, Nintendo, and Sony. Home computers furthered this change as videogames were adopted for early Tandys, Commodores, Apples, and IBMs. Along with the commercial growth of the internet in the early 1990's, videogames on consoles and home computer systems reached critical mass ("Internet", n.d.). Videogames, home computers and the internet have, literally, become ubiquitous.



Historians often find it easier to study problems from several hundred years ago, rather than their own lifetime, due to familiarity and proximity to the issues. Studying the impact of a recent invention such as the internet is equally daunting. Internet activity, such as sales or times a site was accessed, can be quanitified and examined. However, how can we understand the implications the mere presence and use of the internet has had on generations that never knew its absence? How do children form an identity using the internet, a technology that for them has always been there? This is the question asked by Angela Thomas

in her book, *Youth Online: Identity and Literacy in the Digital Age*.

Theory

Videogames have been around since the early 1970's, but works on them have been slower in appearing. Video games and, later, internet usage, like television before them, came under public scrutiny for the effects they might have on children. Home computer systems appeared in the early 1980's, along with the first articles about effects of videogames. During this period, full-length books also appeared on the benefits or detriments of videogames and computers. Sherry Turkle wrote the *Second Self* in 1984, Neil Postman wrote *Amusing Ourselves to Death* in 1986, J.C. Herz wrote *Joystick Nation* in 1997, and Marc Prensky wrote *Digital Based Learning* in 2001. These are certainly not the only books for or against computer usage, but the tip of the better-selling iceberg. These books, however, did not carry the academic provenance to make them applicable for education.

Scientific studies, initially in psychology, tried to prove that games were either dangerous or benign. In 1983, Gibb's study found no evidence that videogames cause negative effects on young people. The study also found that videogame players rank lower than average in obsessive-compulsive behavior. An early study in 1984 concluded that videogames are not addictive and people who frequent arcades are not especially different from the general populace (Egli, 1984). In 1986, McClure and Mears found that heavy videogame use does not lead to mental disorders or delinquency.

However, other studies during the same time period found that videogames have negative effects on children. In 1986, Mehrabian and Wixen found that videogames can create angry or hostile behavior in players, and that the games are not overly pleasurable for the players. Two studies, by Schutte (1988) and Irwin (1995), also concluded that children's behaviors could be negatively modified by exposure to videogames. As one reads these articles from the early 1980's, they might seem like current concerns lobbed at games like *Grand Theft Auto* or television programs like *Jackass*. The two sides have not come to a decisive conclusion. Some conclude that computer usage and videogames are a normal part of play, some that they are damaging the fabric of America. The only change over the last twenty-five years is that computers, and what teenagers do with them, have become more involved, complex, and popular.

Academics were working in the late 1990's with the potential of videogames and computers for education. Articles had been written on the pros or cons of using computer-aided instruction, or videogame-esque concepts and approaches to teaching. However, many of these academics were fighting an uphill battle, with no conclusive evidence from the psychological community on the effects of videogames. That was until James Paul Gee wrote a work in 2003, *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. The difference with Gee is that he was already known for his work on discourse analysis, which gave him the pedigree, or the provenance, to make other academics feel there was merit to this area. Gee focuses on a new area not seen in other literature, the realization that videogames create a learning process. Not only do they create a learning process, but one that players, or students, are willing to immerse themselves in for hundreds of hours. As many scholars have noted, that is hundreds of hours more than they would immerse themselves in their math or English homework. Gee's book influenced hundreds of academics who use his research as their foundation, making this a seminal work for understanding other areas.

Gee links videogames with the constructivist educational models of Bahktin, Bordieu, and Vygotsky. Gee's book examines what he calls the thirty-six learning principles in games which can be broken down into several main areas. Videogames contribute to identity creation and the understanding of its process. They can teach signs, cues, language, and literacy, or even create a

new literacy: digital literacy. Good videogames can be applied to help students learn, and then take that knowledge and apply it to other virtual and real world situations.

In *Youth Online*, Thomas looks at post modern theories and how they might contribute to an understanding of the internet and its use by young people. She then illustrates these possibilities through case studies she has undertaken with teenagers over several years. These teenagers spend many hours on the internet interacting with friends, designing web spaces, playing, studying, and living. In one respect she finds that young people have not changed in their needs, desires, and actions from previous eras. However, she finds that the way in which they meet these needs, desires, and actions has changed. This alteration has occurred, because the internet has become an integral part of the medium of expression. It is necessary for educators, politicians, and others to understand this world, and to recognize the need for a refocusing of perceptions. This change entails understanding online identity and literacies.

Literacy

Literacy used to refer to the ability to read and write. It can now refer to fluidity of knowledge in different areas. These areas or semiotics may be video, pictures, music, computer languages, net speak, game knowledge, print literacy, cultural literacy, or any mix of these. Gee's work has been very influential as applied to this area. Literacy, or literacies, is a more recent idea in the academic community. One could point to Gee or the work of the New London Group on multi-literacies.

Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe have been influenced by Gee's work tremendously. In their edited work, *Gaming Lives in the Twenty First Century* (2007), they and the other authors examine the connection between literacy and videogames. Hawisher and Selfe examine the meaning of literacy and literacies (Hawisher, 2006). They examine how gaming comes with its own rules, understandings, and outcomes. To a great extent, this makes it a learned skill or a literacy, in that what one learns in one game is applicable to others. This is similar to traditional literacy, as learning the alphabet and words can be related to other words.

Constance Steinkuehler (2005) examines the potential of online games from the standpoint of literacy. Text in games is a form of literacy, and so is writing about gaming activity in papers or poems. Angela Thomas explores this area as she examines students' webpage creations and writings. Students who may not be appreciated or excel in traditional educational outlets may be fine at writing, just not specific, assigned topics. For instance, if an English assignment asks one to write prose or poetry about something one enjoys, and the person writes about a videogame, a teacher may scoff at the topic and assign a low grade. However, this does not make the student a bad writer; it makes the teacher critical of the genre. Steinkuehler and Thomas both look at good writing that has science fiction or videogames as the topic. Poetry is about writing what one feels about something, in a specific style. In some cases, people may love a videogame or someone else online, and convey that through their writing. These authors suggest that the goal of writing should be re-examined to include Massive Multi-player Onlines and the internet as valid topics, and to further writing rather than focus on writing about benign topics like trees or snow.

Identity

In addition to literacy, Thomas examines another area related to Gee's work: identity. Instead of focusing on identity creation and videogames, she focuses on identity creation and the internet. She examines the online gaming and social communities of many young people, world-wide, over several years. Her work examines the understandings of identity from Lacan, Bordieu, Derrida, and Foucault. She finds that online living allows one to stretch one's identity and to gain a greater understanding of oneself and others. It also shows that the young people in her study are creating a community of experts who learn from each other. They spend many hours interacting with and

teaching each other, and mastering the technology and techniques in order to communicate and excel in this online world.

Thomas lays out a framework for understanding identity. She relies heavily on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, building on Butler's idea that "identity is a performance of fantasy and desire"(p. 4). In the real world we base our understanding on physical cues gained from our senses. However, in the real world there are limitations to what can occur because of legal, physical, and economic rules. This is not the case online; almost anything that can be imagined can occur. While our body may not actually perform many of the actions in the online context, our other senses can be fully utilized. Heat and cold, physical pain, and hunger may not be felt online, however friendships, loves, hatreds, and visual and audio sensations can be fully experienced. Thus it is possible to have an identity online.

From Foucault via Mansfield, Thomas argues that "if subjects were aware and conscious of the sorts of subjectivities that were being constructed for them, then the possibility of creating 'alternatives' (whether real or fictitious) would become a possibility"(p.21). Thus consciousness of the subjectivities allows for creation of alternatives online. From Lacan via Mansfield, Thomas discusses the understanding of the mirror image and self. It is this mirror image as the avatar that Thomas examines in her case studies. An avatar is the internet user's representation of self, whether as a three-dimensional model or an icon.

Thomas has done an excellent job integrating some oftentimes dense post-structuralist ideas and explaining their applications to the internet quite clearly. Thomas aptly fleshes out these theories by describing several case studies of teenagers interviewed over several years. These students discuss life, loves, online preferences, real world selves, and their understanding of the world--online and otherwise. These case studies illuminate Butler's idea of identity as well as Lacan's mirror images and understanding of self. Thomas examines some of the pictorial representations, or avatars, of these students. It is important to briefly discuss the case studies. While examining the case studies I will add some thoughts on the potential for educators before discussing what Thomas feels the implications of her case studies as they apply to identity.

On a Tolkien-based internet site, Thomas examines the interactions and involvement of a community of gamers. The activities of these students exemplify the possibilities of education and the integration of technology. The community interacts as a community of experts. The teenagers learn from one another how to interact socially and how to program and use computer code from one another. The students who initially knew little develop an interest and learn from each other how to make a website, including all the appropriate bells and whistles, and are then able to help others as well.

Similar to the case study of the Tolkien site, Thomas examines a palace community. A palace site is a two-dimensional world of community interaction. She examines the graphical representations of the actors, male and female, and how their depictions are representative of their identity. She also examines the interactions between the community members, including conversations, virtual gift exchanges, stories, mythologies, and understandings between the users. It is as important to understand how and why students develop their online identity, as it is to attempt to understand why students wear specific outfits or hairstyles in the real world. In the real world, personal choice may signal personal problems, or personal taste. Knowing this difference can assist educators in determining when to get involved and when to allow some room for expression.

In another case study, Thomas focuses on two adolescent girls over several years. These girls interact in writing online fan fiction. Thomas specifically examines the creative process these girls utilize. They speak online and over the phone, using instant messaging, email, and web publishing. They brainstorm, write, rewrite, role play, and act for their different characters. Thomas argues that the girls go through a very strenuous process in producing peer reviewed fiction. A possibility

for educators is integrating some of these ideas into their own classrooms. A potential hazard of this is the necessity of faculty to be familiar with the technology and its possibilities.

Being familiar with the technology and the beliefs behind it can be difficult. For instance many adults may see real life and online interaction as somehow different. Thomas argues that contrary to popular views, children do not live online and offline lives. Children live a life that has components of both. This is a seamless world for them, though their elders may attempt to draw lines between them. Students and many in the current "generation next" do converse through the computer, over the phone, and in person. Studying need not be at a person's house, nor even in the same country. Business meetings are held using computers with cameras, and students are utilizing similar technologies for friendships around the globe.

Thomas addresses several important ideas in her work concerning online identity, through these case studies. One is that identity is partially formed through online interaction. Through her case studies, Thomas illustrates periods when teenagers interact using email, instant messaging, telephone calls, role playing, and face to face encounters. In this case, the internet offers another avenue for exploring relationships, gender, empathy, teamwork and other facets of the personality.

Teenagers also make active decisions in creating their online persona, or avatar. This may begin with their online name, but goes much further. An important decision is online representation, or how someone is depicted or seen. The avatar might be drawn electronically, hand drawn or painted, or digitally merged from other pictures or images. The way the avatar looks, from facial expressions to clothing, is also important as the choices convey certain messages. Props also can say a lot about the avatar. Here Thomas is touching on the tenets of art history and critique. Symbols, clothes, and backdrops meant a lot in Renaissance art and continue to do so in online representation. The importance of the avatar cannot be understated. Just as teenagers invest time in their presentation at school, they spend much time creating their online identity, and they have as much invested in the avatar. It is a means to be seen, understood, and to interact with others. They can also identify with those in their group, clan, site, or community. Interacting with friends allows us to understand certain social mores in society, as does engaging in online communities.

Part of identity is knowing specific cues and forms of language within a social group, which links identity back to literacy. This may include familiarity with touchdowns, birdies, or esoteric disciplinary jargon. A similar literacy is required for online interaction. However this literacy may include other, less commonly known forms of communication, such as images, icons, code, technical terms, emoticons, and other computer terminologies.

While identity may be somewhat set in real life based on social, racial, and sexual limits, these need not apply online. One can choose to be whomever he or she wants to fit in. Making these decisions and continuing to fit in is a political choice. Online one may be passive or aggressive. If acting one way does not work, a new identity can be created and tested. The online environment allows users to test aspects of identity fantasy. Physically, this is a less damaging arena, but it can be just as mentally damaging. A person can be hurt through online breakups, attacks, and affronts, just as can anyone else in real life. Though the environment is virtual, the pain can be quite real.

Some may question Thomas' use of multiple case studies as being too specific, and not generalizable. But each case study may bring to light new facets of youth experience and the online world. The case studies themselves illustrate many similarities, indicating a certain level of generalizability. Thomas has done an excellent job of weaving these studies together, while applying a theoretical model to explain them as a whole. She has given her audience a glimpse of the online world and how it is perceived by those who know it best.

Conclusion

This work is extremely important for educators in understanding the state of current students, and as a call for changes in the future educational process. This is an accessible work that explains the theories and their applications in a very clear way. Through Thomas' case studies, it also offers a picture of the world of the modern and future student. This work is useful for those in academia, in teaching, or those looking to understand what it is that students do online. However, it only offers a glimpse. Thomas opens the reader's eyes, but it is up to the reader to proceed down the rabbit hole.

Can the institution of education proceed in the traditional manner? Students spend most of their lives outside of school. What they are learning outside the institutional environment is not replicated inside it. Certainly students need to learn about mathematics, language, and science. But is the medium currently used the best, or is the world that Thomas is showing a better one to model for educators? This is something that Thomas calls for in Australia, and around the world. Online literacy will be important for success in the future. It is a travesty for schools not to integrate these areas of literacy into education.

Thomas is not the only voice urging these ideas. Her work resonates with that of Gee, Hawisher, Selfe, and Steinkuehler. Some of this work focuses on videogames and how they can be used in education, but also on how videogames form an important part of learning literacy. Reading and writing are not enough – other literacies are important in education. As Thomas has shown, students will spend the time learning them, and they can learn from each other as a community of experts. This work also attempts to understand identity creation of students in online environments, equally echoing the call from Gee. The problem with utilizing these works is not educating the students, but educating the educators.

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