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## **Going After the Straw Man: Video Games in Radical Theory**

### *Introduction*

In an effort to provide schools with a framework for introducing media literacy into teaching practice, the Center for Media Literacy (CML) has developed *Five Key Questions of Media Literacy and Five Core Concepts* to use in media analysis. According to CML, learning to apply these questions and concepts to "any media message" is a core skill for life in the 21st Century" (2011, CML Framework, para 4). In this essay, I will take issue with the *Key Questions* and their application to "any media message." In addition, I will argue that this "text-centered" approach (Lewis & Jhally, 1998 p.109) to media literacy continues to exclude the political economy surrounding texts and their affiliated media systems as *Core Concepts* necessary media literacy skills. As an example of a medium in which the *Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts* fall short, I will argue that they are not applicable to online gaming culture from a radical approach of media literacy perspective.

In the following pages, I will define the radical approach to media literacy, discuss the radical approach as it relates to online gaming, and argue the inability to apply the *Five Key Questions of Media Literacy and Five Core Concepts* to online gaming communities. I will conclude by providing a proposal for a new model to replace the *Five Key Questions of Media Literacy and Five Core Concepts*.

Key terms: online gaming, communities of practice, modding, political economy, homophily

### *Radical Approach to Media Literacy*

The consideration of video games in media literacy alone can be considered part of radical theory given the paradigm's origination in social reconstructionism and post modern educational philosophy (Kellner, 2001). These historical educational paradigms embrace participatory learning environments, include the study of popular culture as essential in understanding multiculturalism, and envision teachers and students as change agents (Ornstein & Hunkins, 1988). The goal of a radical approach to media literacy is to educate people to resist the dominant encoded meanings within cultural texts and produce their own critical and alternative media systems (Kellner, 2003, para 11). These encoded themes include issues of power, class, race, sex, and gender. The radical approach contends that today's dominant media systems are based on profit, not on people (Class notes October 12, 2011). The hyper concentrated media today serves solely commercial purposes and promotes the ideologies conservative, upper-class, white males. In order to fully embrace media literacy education, the current media systems need to be challenged to provide representations of the ideologies that make up a multicultural nation.

To challenge the media requires educators to move beyond a "text centered approach" to media literacy and teach students "how to engage and challenge media institutions" (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p. 109). In order to create change and resist the influence of the dominant culture, media literacy programs must educate youth to become "sophisticated citizens rather than sophisticated consumers" (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p.109). A sophisticated consumer is able to analyze a text and point to the various tools used by the producer to persuade an individual to buy certain products or target a specific audience. To become sophisticated citizens, individuals must learn to not only analyze the text, but understand also "why these texts are produced, under

what constraints and conditions, and by whom" (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p.111). By encouraging students to become sophisticated citizens, we create the possibility of a "more democratic media" (Lewis & Jhally, 1998, p.110) At its core, to be media literate from the radical perspective means to empower individuals to become change agents to ensure multicultural ideologies have a presence in the media, issues of access and affordance to new media technology are addressed, and all individuals are given the opportunity to acquire the necessary skills to participate, modify, and develop new media technologies.

### *Radical Approach to Online Gaming*

In various approaches to 21st century skills and media literacy, much evidence has been given to issues of affordance, access, and skills surrounding internet technologies, computers, and cell phones. An area that must also be addressed is the online gaming culture in which today's youth are participating. The current *Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts* do not address video games in general, but also ignore the online gaming world and their affiliated "communities of practice" (Wegner 1998 as cited by Gee, 2008, p.24). These online communities add another dimension to media literacy in that adolescents are not just consumers of these media but are in fact participating, producing, and communicating within a media system that is based on money, power, privilege (Class notes October 12, 2011). From the radical approach of media literacy, it is essential that the *Five Key Questions and Five Core Concepts* become applicable to these online spaces. The goal of media literacy should be to provide adolescents with the necessary skills to decode sociocultural issues such as race, sex, and class not only within the images and storylines of video games, but also within gaming systems, platforms, and the communities that are created in online gaming worlds. Adolescents need to

become empowered to create their own systems and communities which will allow for equal participation and access to all individuals.

Henry Giroux contends that where today's schools fall short is in their lack of "critical pedagogy" and failure of schools to incorporate "the sites that people concretely inhabit" (2004, p.41). According to Activision, producer of the Call of Duty video game series, players spend over 58 minutes inhabiting an online gaming community, which is longer than the average amount of time a user spends on Facebook (Snider, 2011). These digital worlds are communities of practice where adolescents are spending considerable amounts of time and are also learning valuable skills. Scholars such as James Paul Gee (2005), hold that "good" games – even those that involve violence -provide important learning experiences that allow players to feel like active agents (producers) not just passive recipients (consumers) (p. 6). Video games encourage problems solving, active engagement in communities, mentoring, and working toward a common goal (Gee, 2009). School-based literacy programs have yet to acknowledge the importance of these virtual worlds as learning communities.

The skills that children are acquiring in these communities of practice are 21st century learning skills that have the potential for youth to become sophisticated and critical citizens (Class notes September 27, 2011). By identifying the lessons gaming teach as valuable 21st century skills, what then needs to be addressed is the fact that these online communities exclude specific populations. These acquired skills need to be taught to *all* children, not just those who have access to the media system. To create democratic learning environments, in addition to analyzing the texts within the game, we need to better understand who is producing these communities, who is participating in these communities, and who is excluded from these communities.

*What is being ignored: Profit, Affordance, and Creation*

While issues such as violence, racism, gendered-identity, and male domination are imagery within video games that are often brought to the attention of consumers in mainstream media, what is not being addressed are the "broader institutional and business contexts of software production, distribution, and consumption" (Ito, 2008, p.90). These issues represent the political economy of the game such as who is profiting from the games, who is playing the games and able to afford them, and who is not. For example, the *Call of Duty* series developed by Activision has sold more than 100 million copies of *Call of Duty* games leading to over \$5 billion in profits since the first game's creation in 2003 (Snider, 2011). Activision has also profited millions of dollars from guidebooks and online multiplayer subscriptions. According to Activision, 30 million players world-wide participate in online multiplayer modes (Snider, 2011). Critical media literacy approaches to the *Call of Duty* series may address the content of the images within the game such as depictions of war, race, and male domination and recognize that Activision is profiting from sales. However, from a radical approach, the broader issues include who are the programmers creating these depictions of war, to what populations is the game being sold, and the demographics of the participatory culture that has formed in these communities of practice. Additionally, the *Call of Duty* series must be juxtaposed to *World of War Craft* which has a membership of 11 million online members (Blizzard Entertainment, 2008). What are the differences between these communities of practice? Who is profiting from user membership?

Affordance also is a crucial area that must be considered in online gaming systems. It is important to point out that affordance is not just in the ownership of the game, but in the platform that allows the game to be played such as computers, gaming consoles, and the ability to pay for subscriptions to online services that allow for multiplayer experiences. According to Everett and Watkins (2008), poor and working-class youth play video games, but primarily on consoles rather than on the personal computers, that "foster more transformative gaming practices like modding [modifying game hardware or software] and world-building." (p.159) Black and Latino youth are also "less likely than their white counterparts to live in homes with personal computers" (Everett & Watkins, 2008, p.159). These socioeconomic factors exclude poor, low income, African-American, and Latino populations from participation in virtual games that allow for deeper learning experiences. By excluding populations from participation in communities of practices, the concept of homophily is also reinforced. The participants in these online spaces become structurally divided which can breed intolerance (boyd, 2009). The communities of adolescents who are participating in online gaming communities become divided into groups who share commonalities such as race, gender, sexuality and socioeconomic status.

I would be remiss in not devoting a brief portion of this paper to include the ability of youth to create their own video games and systems. Radical literacy theory embraces the idea of adolescents' ability to create their own systems. While youth do spend time modding video game storylines and characters, there are limits to how much can be changed within the game because of their lack of programming skills and the technical constraints of the system. As Rushkoff suggests in *Program or be Programmed (2010)*, we need to consider that, "we teach kids how to use software but not write software" (p.18). In order to create democratic media, programming is a skill that should be open for all students to acquire. The teaching of game programming and

game development has been embraced in schools such as *Quest to Learn* (2011) in New York whose pedagogy is based on teaching games:

"as rule-based learning systems, creating worlds in which players actively participate, use strategic thinking to make choices, solve complex problems, seek content knowledge, receive constant feedback, and consider the point of view."

The difficulty in incorporating these programming skills into mainstream education is that the skills border on information computer technology instruction which media literacy theorists have struggled to break free of as a label. Additionally, given the constraints of NCLB, it would prove difficult to implement these skills-based programs in most schools systems. The teaching of such skills would, most likely, be confined to after school programs. Despite the difficulty in implementation to current schools systems, programming should none-the-less be a consideration in media literacy programs.

#### *Conclusion: New Model for Media Literacy*

From a radical approach to media literacy *Five Key Questions and Core Concepts* may be used to analyze the images within the game, cannot be applied to video game systems. The *Key Questions* and *Concepts* fail to take into consideration the political economy of gaming systems, the creators of the messages within the game, the participants within video game communities of practice, the sociocultural issues that exclude specific populations from participation, and the inability of youth to create their own system. In an effort to move toward a more democratic and participatory learning environment, I propose the following alternative message be used in media literacy programs. The core concepts should reflect the goals of media literacy from the radical perspective which is to challenge educators to look beyond the text-centered approach to media

literacy and to empower youth to become active participants in the media by engaging and challenging media institutions.

### GOALS OF MEDIA LITERACY



**Community:** The media should build communities rather than separate them

**Affordance:** Individuals have the right to access all media

**Production:** All individuals have the right to produce media content

**Challenge:** Individuals must become engaged to challenge media systems

**Empower:** Acquiring 21st century skills leads to empowerment

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