

Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom

Video games offer new, complex forms of interactive narrative. Ostenson shows how students in his English class have begun to study this evolving genre.

I've spent many hours over the past few weeks immersed in a fictional, underwater city of Rapture, founded as a haven of Objectivist ideals but which has since become a ruined, dystopian nightmare. I've dodged genetically enhanced nightmares and faced down monstrous mechanical drones as I've wandered through the vast spaces of the city, seeking an escape. Along the way, I've saved the lives of a handful of orphaned girls, innocent waifs exploited by a malicious businessman intent on using the girls as part of his scheme for cheap, mass-market genetic enhancements. As my life ends, these same girls—who have since matured and found peace and purpose in new lives outside the twisted Rapture—gather around my hospital bed, gratefully entwining their hands in mine. In the real world, my heart is touched and I'm grateful I made the choices I did.

I could be describing my reaction to a novel I just finished or a movie I've just watched, and many of you readers would think nothing of my response—in fact, you might recall similar emotional responses you've had to literature or art. But the previous paragraph describes my (very real) reaction to the ending cinematic of a video game called *BioShock*, designed by Ken Levine and released in 2007. The game was widely hailed in reviews as a “mature video game that succeeds in making you think while you play” (Bray) and a game that “[did] something no other game [had] done to date: It really makes you feel” (Davenport); it was praised for being “anchored by [a] provocative, morally-based storyline” (Schiesel).

That a video game might be discussed in such terms may surprise many of us, but it shouldn't. Video games have come a long way from the days of *Pong* and *Pac-Man*, and not just in terms of graphical complexity. The games of today have come to rely more and more on the elements of fiction in their design, and they represent unexplored territory in studying the nature and impact of narrative. As they have become more mainstream, many have suggested a place for video games in the English classroom—authors in the pages of this journal have argued that video games can boost problem-solving skills (Desilets) and enhance reading skills (Adams), that video-game-based books can serve as bridges to other reading (Jolley), and that games can help teach students about social issues (Sardone and Devlin-Scherer). And it isn't a stretch to argue that video games have the power to motivate students; it's a popular medium, with 97% of teens reporting that they play video games (Lenhart et al.) and almost \$25 billion spent on them in 2011 (“Essential Facts”).

But I want to suggest a unique reason for bringing video games into the English classroom: There's a place for a purposeful study of video games in today's English classroom because they represent some of the most important storytelling in the 21st century. This new medium is not only connected to our students' lives and interests but also represents our society's efforts to push the boundaries of storytelling in meaningful ways.

As Jonathan Gottschall argues in his exploration of humans as storytellers, we have been telling stories for tens of thousands of years, and “we

are, as a species, addicted to story” (xiv). Recognizing this helps explain why narrative takes such a prominent role in English classrooms, even as informational and nonfiction texts increase their presence. English teachers seek to help students, through a formal study of narrative, learn to interpret and extract meaning from the stories they encounter—meanings that shed light on what it means to be human, what it means to care for another person, what it means to wrestle with human emotions, what it means to triumph in the face of adversity.

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only (or even, always, the best) medium for telling stories. English teachers have recognized the value of diverse media and content in our English classroom, from advertisements (Hobbs) to film (Golden; Teasley and Wilder) to pop culture (Smith, Smith, and Bobbitt). As new forms of media have come onto the scene, it’s a testament to the deep-seated role that story plays in our lives

that each new medium—radio, still images, film, television, and now the Internet and computers—in turn has been used to convey narratives.

Video Games as a Narrative Medium

To consider the narrative potential of video games, we can begin by asking ourselves what we mean by the words *story* and *narrative*, an exercise I’ve often asked my students to engage in. They reply with answers such as, “It’s got a beginning, middle, and an end” (suggesting that plot matters) or “It’s got a problem in it” (a nod to conflict) or with comments about morals or messages (a reference to theme). This emphasis on literary elements suggests that story is a creative work that embodies these elements and uses them in a recognizable way.

With such a definition, we can make an argument that even the simplest video games could be considered narratives. The popular game *Angry Birds*, focused on launching virtual birds to de-

stroy precariously built structures populated by green pigs, rests on the central narrative conflict that these pigs have stolen the birds’ eggs. In a similar vein, the string of games in the *Mario* franchise from Nintendo demonstrates a narrative arc propelled by Mario’s conflicts with various villains (Bowser, Donkey Kong, and an alternative self named Wario) as they seek to kidnap his love interest, Princess Peach, or wreak other havoc in the Mushroom Kingdom where these characters dwell.

These are superficial stories at best, however, and in games like these the narrative usually serves as minimal dressing to the reflex challenges or exploration tasks at the heart of the game. In other types of video games, the narrative arc plays a much more integral role, as in the genre of role-playing games. These games, inspired by paper-and-pencil games such as *Dungeons & Dragons*, cast the player in the role of hero and unfold an often-complex story in which the hero must accomplish tasks (“quests”) to advance the story and resolve the central conflict. Many of these games (such as the *Baldur’s Gate*, *Elder Scrolls*, *Fallout*, and *Mass Effect* series) feature extensive dialogue that has players reading as much as engaging in virtual combat. While a central focus of these games is character development—gaining skills and abilities as quests are successfully completed—the entire rationale for playing is provided by the narrative and the problems posed within the storyline.

A final genre of video games that relies heavily on narrative elements is the adventure game, one of the oldest video game genres. Rather than relying on reflexes or developing a virtual character’s skills, these games ask the player to solve puzzles through in-game research and trial and error, but they rely heavily on story elements to provide a context for these challenges. The earliest examples of these games include “interactive fiction” games that feature no graphics but rather copious amounts of descriptive text; players interact with the game world through simple, typed commands (“go north” or “examine the egg” or “enter the forest”) and often must read the game’s text carefully to pick up on subtle clues to the challenges posed within the game. These games (since updated with complex graphics and mouse-driven interfaces) have often featured the most complex storytelling, which is why I focused on

them as I explored video games and narratives with my students.

Studying Video Games in the Classroom

My efforts to bring video games into the high school classroom were part of a larger unit on the power of storytelling. In this unit, we began by looking at ancient Greco-Roman and Norse myths and discussing the purposes for these stories and the influence they have had on Western culture. We explored the archetypal hero journey as described by Joseph Campbell and looked at examples from these ancient myths as well as modern examples in such characters as Frodo Baggins, Luke Skywalker, and Harry Potter. This exploration of archetypes provided a segue into a unit on film in which we explored cinematic techniques as we analyzed narrative and dramatic aspects of film, as described by Alan B. Teasley and Ann Wilder. Our studies of film provided an opportunity to reacquaint my students with the elements of fiction, and I pushed students to consider the unique way these elements were presented in film.

The final section of our unit was dedicated to a study of video games as narrative. I began our study by asking students to again consider the question of how we define story—a question they had richer responses to given our exploration of myths and archetypes and film narratives. Then I brought the discussion to video games by asking students who played them and to name some of the games they played, a move that caused some students to perk up and sit up straighter in their seats. As we shared some titles and experiences with video games, I brought out the central question of this exploration: Can video games tell a story, and, if so, how?

While most students reported playing video games, not all of them had experience with games that go beyond tests of coordination and reflexes. If we were truly to explore the potential storytelling power of this new medium, I needed to help my students develop a broader sense of the video games out there.

A Historical Beginning

We started with interactive fiction (IF), one of the earliest forms of storytelling games. This genre has the advantage of being low-cost and easy to access

(free versions of many of these games can be played online or on mobile devices). Before letting students play some of these games in the computer lab, I oriented them with a brief tutorial. I have since found a wonderful resource from Andrew Plotkin, an accomplished interactive fiction author, that I now use with my university students when we undertake a similar exploration. (See <http://pr-if.org/doc/play-if-card/> to download a PDF copy.)

I modeled the first steps of playing this game by launching one on my computer while students observed. I started with *Zork*, a fantasy-themed game that is one of the most popular games of this type (playable online at <http://thcnet.net/zork/index.php>), and I demonstrated how simple commands such as “take sack” or “go north” or “read leaflet” allowed us to control the virtual protagonist and manipulate the game world. We read together the descriptions of locations in the game and made choices about where to go, what to pick up, and how to get into the strange white house that features in the beginning of the game. When we tried to enter the dark upstairs of the house, we were warned about being eaten by a “grue,” and my students then suggested we look for a flashlight or perhaps something to defend ourselves with, thus demonstrating that the game was already encouraging them to make the kinds of inferences we make when we read conventional stories. I encouraged students to pay close attention to details in the game’s text as those details often came in handy when trying to make progress in the game, such as when we examined the carpet and were told of an “irregularity” beneath it—leading us to a trap door that starts us on the real adventure.

Once students had the hang of the simple parsers used in these games and how to interact with the game world, I had them explore this genre on their own; they could either continue with *Zork* or choose from a half-dozen other games ported to the Web (available at <http://pot.home.xs4all.nl/infocom/>). My students dove in eagerly, and I enjoyed watching them become as engaged in the worlds of these games as they would in books or films. I was pleased to see some students start sketching maps of the game world on scratch paper and others asking me about indirect objects (a response generated sometimes by the game’s parser when players don’t give enough information in

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Up a Tree                               Score: 5           Moves: 17
Forest Path

>look
Forest Path
This is a path winding through a dimly lit forest. The path heads north-south
here. One particularly large tree with some low branches stands at the edge of
the path.
You hear in the distance the chirping of a song bird.

>climb tree
Up a Tree
You are about 10 feet above the ground nestled among some large branches. The
nearest branch above you is above your reach.
Beside you on the branch is a small bird's nest.
In the bird's nest is a large egg encrusted with precious jewels, apparently
scavenged by a childless songbird. The egg is covered with fine gold inlay,
and ornamented in lapis lazuli and mother-of-pearl. Unlike most eggs, this one
is hinged and closed with a delicate looking clasp. The egg appears extremely
fragile.

>get egg
Taken.

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Gameplay from the text adventure game *Zork I* (published 1980 by Infocom).

their typed commands). And, importantly, over the 20–30 minutes immersed in an interactive fiction game, students had done a meaningful amount of reading and problem solving. While we explored, I took opportunities to pause and discuss students' observations about the narrative nature of these games. Interactive fiction games provide the easiest point of entrance into this discussion as they are so clearly narrative: elements of plot, conflict, and character are fairly evident in the games' design.

Seeing the Whole Picture

Text adventure games such as *Zork* are, as my students would phrase it, pretty “old fashioned.” Their heavy reliance on text and full-word/phrase commands are qualitatively different from the games my students play on their PCs or console systems where visuals replace text descriptions and physical controllers allow them to interact with the game world. Once we had seen the potential of text adventure games, I moved on to exploring more recent games with my students that featured modern graphics and controls.

The first game I introduced to students was the historically significant game *Myst* (1993), a game with lush (for its time) visuals enhanced by haunting audio effects. In this game, the player takes on the role of the Stranger, a man who encounters an odd book that describes the island of *Myst*; when he reaches the end of the book, he is transported to the island and into the middle of a power conflict between rival members of an ancient, alien family. Since I couldn't afford copies of

this game for all of my students, we engaged in a sort of “group play” to explore it. I launched the program on our classroom PC and projector and we played through the opening of the game together, solving the first couple of puzzles and revealing a bit of the opening exposition as students coached me on what to do. Students noted, in subsequent discussion, that this game played like the interactive fiction games we had just played, with similar narrative structures (character, setting, and conflict are revealed quite early in the game) and a similar participatory nature. When

I asked them about differences, many commented that the visuals and full-motion video in *Myst* felt more immersive than the text of IF. I asked them to consider the concept that some people complain that these visuals destroy imagination and make the whole experience “easier” than if they were reading text. They had comments on this, as you might suspect, that emphasized the power that a visual and auditory experience such as *Myst* could provide.

We explored similar issues when we looked at an online game that is familiar to most teens: *World of Warcraft*. Many of the boys (and a few of the girls) in my high school classes played the game and eagerly talked about the avatars they had created in the game as well as their virtual accomplishments. After showing some of the gameplay, I asked students to consider how this game's participatory nature differed from games such as *Myst* or the IF games we had played. Among other conclusions, students expressed that games such as *World of Warcraft* featured similar elements of storytelling, but the plot (especially) in a game like this was subtly different. Because this game allows for even freer exploration of a virtual world and unprecedented freedom of choice compared to those earlier games, each player experiences his or her own plotline while playing the game. My students also noted the strong social aspect of games like this that allow multiple players to complete quests in the game world together, a feature that many students enjoyed. They talked about the friendships they had built in-game (including with people they had never met in life) and the way joint partici-



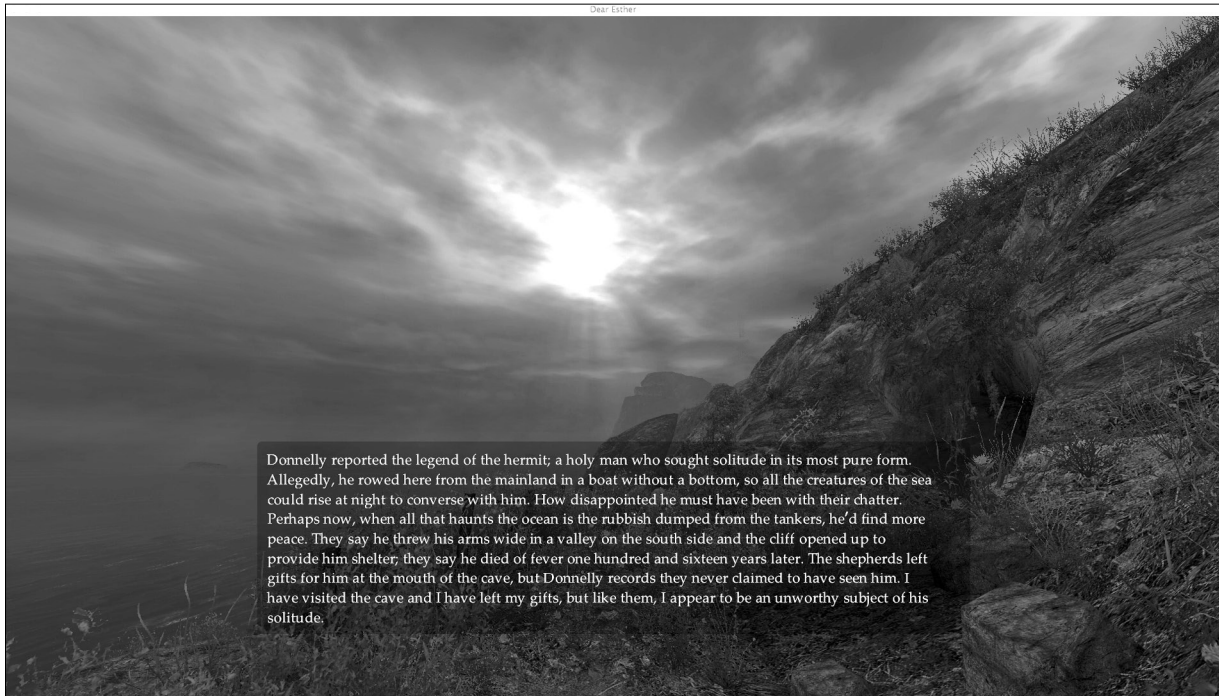
Image from the updated iPad version of the classic game *Myst* (published 1991 by Brøderbund).

pation in the game’s narrative strengthened those relationships.

We then moved to explore a different kind of game that I chose deliberately to provoke contrasts to the other games we had looked at: *The Sims* series. *The Sims* is more of a “life simulation” than it is a strict adventure game. Players create an avatar but then spend their time in-game trying to build that avatar’s relationships with others, to earn

money from a job, and to purchase items to fill a virtual house. As we engaged in group play with this game, I asked students if they thought this game told a story. At first, they found it more difficult to see some of these elements, but eventually they started to realize that the game featured characters, a setting, and even plot elements and conflict—just as all stories do—but that those latter elements were much more malleable in this game. Depending on the player’s choices, the plot events and conflicts would be very different from person to person. But

the most important narrative element of this story was the character—almost all of the game’s objectives centered on developing the character through relationships with others and acquiring possessions. I asked students to consider the implications of a game whose main goal seems to be to acquire possessions and this led us into some interesting discussions about the game’s “theme” of consumerism. (The January 2010 issue of *English Journal* features



Donnelly reported the legend of the hermit; a holy man who sought solitude in its most pure form. Allegedly, he rowed here from the mainland in a boat without a bottom, so all the creatures of the sea could rise at night to converse with him. How disappointed he must have been with their chatter. Perhaps now, when all that haunts the ocean is the rubbish dumped from the tankers, he’d find more peace. They say he threw his arms wide in a valley on the south side and the cliff opened up to provide him shelter, they say he died of fever one hundred and sixteen years later. The shepherds left gifts for him at the mouth of the cave, but Donnelly records they never claimed to have seen him. I have visited the cave and I have left my gifts, but like them, I appear to be an unworthy subject of his solitude.

Opening text from a playthrough of the game *Dear Esther* (published 2012 by thechineseroom).

compelling teaching activities that could extend students' critical exploration of consumerism.)

A final game I've used more recently is *Dear Esther*, a game that eschews some of the traditional gaming elements (solving puzzles or completing

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tasks) and focuses almost exclusively on the exploration of a deserted island and the uncovering of a rather complex backstory. This game emphasizes narration and exploration, with some beautiful atmospheric and a haunting narrator. Two things about this game appeal to me in terms of classroom study: the game is randomized so that each "read-through" is different, and the lack of some of the gameplay elements al-

lows us to explore interesting contrasts with the other games we've looked at. This game, I think, can do more to help students see the future potential of video games as a storytelling medium.

Reflections and Revelations

Frequently as we explored these games, I paused and discussed with students the narrative nature of the games, asking questions such as:

- Does this game have a setting? What is it?
- Who are the characters in this game (including you, the player)? What do we know about them?
- Is there conflict in the game? Describe the conflict.
- Is there a plot in this game? How is it constructed? Will the plot of this story be the same for every reader-player?
- How is this story similar to other stories that you've read/seen? What devices did the game authors borrow from these other stories?
- How is the story told here different from what we'd normally encounter in a book or short story? How about in a movie/film?

These questions were designed to help students think more deeply about the experience of playing certain kinds of video games and to connect that experience to traditional storytelling. But I also

wanted students to dig deeper, to start to recognize the ways that video games can be an expressive medium, one with unique capacities to tell stories in ways that other media cannot (Murray).

It's in pushing students to think in terms of the nature of the video game medium that we reach our most meaningful conclusions (and ask some important questions) about games and their storytelling potential. Once the students begin to see the unique affordances of video games, they are on the path to becoming more critical about the ways media work in their lives—understandings that I hope will bleed over into other media that surround them. Getting to that point isn't always easy, though; I summarize here some of the conclusions we reached as a result of our exploration, some of which came spontaneously and some of which my students needed gentle prodding from me to realize.

Participation, Control, and Investment

The first comment students make about the uniqueness of the video game medium is that this form of storytelling is participatory. They acknowledge that the main draw of these kinds of games is that you are the hero, you are the one who makes many of the choices and who drives the plot. I helped students connect this to the idea of point of view as we often discussed it with traditional written narratives. Many students could recognize first-person and third-person points of view, but few had been exposed to a story told in second person. The writing of the IF games they played allowed them to experience a story from this perspective, and they commented that this made them more engaged since the words were directed at them and their choices made an impact on the direction the plot would take.

The participatory nature of such texts as video games has been explored in literary criticism, most notably for this context by Espen Aarseth, who argues that digital texts (or "ergodic texts," as he labels them) such as the video games described here are unique from other literary texts. While a reader of a typical text can become lost in the world of the book, he or she is ultimately powerless to control the narrative and can only be a spectator. In video game narratives, however, effort is required of the reader—the choices a reader-player makes in a video game directly impact the outcomes of the narrative (Aarseth 1–4).

When I asked students what this participation meant to the nature of the story being told, at first they focused their comments on the fact that it makes the games more enjoyable than reading from books. But with some prodding, they began to suggest that this participation increased the meaning of certain choices they made. In a story from a book, they suggested, you might become invested in a character and his or her choices, but not to the same degree if *you* are the character making the choices and dealing with the outcomes (even if those consequences are virtual). Such a distinction seemed to give a unique power to video game narratives for my students.

Branching Plots

More sophisticated observations about this medium surfaced after further discussion about the participatory nature of games, and one of these centered around the branching nature of the plots in this game. Many games that students were familiar with (often falling into the first-person shooter category) were examples of games “on rails”—games that proceed fairly linearly, regardless of a player’s actions. Students compared games like this to most books they’d read and noted that these games’ attraction rested mostly on being able to solve puzzles requiring good timing or hand-eye coordination. The games we explored in class featured more complex plots in that our actions could directly affect certain outcomes in the game. Forgetting to take the lantern in the early stages of *Zork*, for example, would cause difficulties later on when we encountered dark areas of the game world.

We talked about how each reader-player’s experience with a game could be conceivably different, and then I asked students to consider what that meant in terms of the narrative power of these games. We noted that these possibilities allowed players to explore alternative choices, to make moral choices that may not always be easy, and to see the results of those choices. These stories took on a greater power in terms of vicarious experiences than books ever could—within one “text” we could explore multiple lines of possibility whereas in a single book there was only likely to be one line. Janet Murray calls these “multiform” stories (30) and suggests that they are more compelling for us today given how aware we are of “alternative possible selves, of alternate possible worlds, and of the limitless inter-

secting stories of the actual world” (38). My students saw these multiform stories as entertaining and appreciated the possibilities for replay and exploration provided by them, but they may also have been sensing something meaningful from the world around them reflected in these virtual worlds.

Evolving Characters


When we discussed characters as portrayed in video games, students pointed out that they were often flat or even stereotypes. Villains were often portrayed as through-and-through bad guys while the player’s character was often heroic or special in some way and expected to make virtuous and noble choices. Some girls in my class who played games complained of sexist depictions of females in some games. The ensuing debate opened up an important discussion that helped students think more critically about the way characters are portrayed in video games and the broader implications of those portrayals.

Students noted a shift in this, however, as more recent games allow for more ambiguity in the player’s character, and the game’s antagonists are not always portrayed in such black-and-white terms (as in the *Bioshock* games, where the player is allowed to pursue less savory means for moving through the game and the villain is not wholly evil). These shifts—more agency for players and more complex representations of good and evil—show a maturing of the video game genre as it comes to more authentically represent the world around us.

Curious about these points, I pushed students to talk about characters in video games and whether they were more or less “real” to them compared to characters encountered in books. My students struggled with this idea a bit and at first suggested that because our exposure to these characters is so brief in video games (as opposed to the pages and pages a book author gets), we can’t really connect with them in the same sense. I reminded them, though, that we might feel sympathies toward film characters and we aren’t exposed to as much about them as we might be in a book. To help resolve this conundrum, I shared with my students Ken Perlin’s ideas about how the fact that we give up our agency when we enter the narrative stream of a book actually allows us to explore a character more fully because “the narrative and point of view lead us forcefully into [the character’s] vulnerable inner

landscape” (12). With this idea, we could explore elements of storytelling that are lost (or perhaps experienced differently) when we gain the agency and control offered by video games.

Awakening Students’ Critical Awareness

I didn’t set out to study video games as a way of motivating reluctant learners or bringing more of the students’ culture into the classroom (although both things happened, happily, as a result of our exploration). I wanted to help them explore in more critical ways the power and potential of storytelling by looking at a medium that is still growing and evolving. The few days we spent playing together facilitated deep and engaging discussions about the power of the video game, its unique strengths and weaknesses as a storytelling medium, and the potential future of the genre. While we live and breathe story in the typical English classroom, we don’t often push its boundaries and explore its frontiers. I have found that doing so, even for just a short time, awakens a critical awareness for students of the power and influence of narrative in their lives. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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While students interact with a range of print, visual, and sound texts, they do not always recognize that these many documents are texts—and this includes video games. By creating an inventory of personal texts, students begin to consciously recognize the many literacy demands in contemporary society. Students begin this lesson by brainstorming a list of items that combine different media for expressing ideas, such as posters or DVDs. After the lists are shared, students create an inventory of significant texts that they have engaged with over a specified period of time, and they discuss why it is important to interact with a variety of different types of texts. With this start, students create a working definition of literacy that they refine and explore as they continue their investigation of the texts that they interact with at home, at school, and in other settings. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/defining-literacy-digital-world-915.html>