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Digital writing in the new literacies age: Insights from an online writing community

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ABSTRACT

Young people write themselves into being through online forms of expression characterised by literate digital practices. This paper focuses on the characteristics of writing in authentic digital spaces. It begins by introducing new understandings about writing, summarising the research literature associated with new literacies and the impact of new technological ‘stuff’ and new ethos ‘stuff’ (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). An analysis of writing practices from one online community, typical of the digital sites frequented by middle years’ students, is then conducted, demonstrating how the literacy practices enacted by its members reflect many of the salient shifts in writing that Merchant (2007) argues characterise digital literacy. The distinctive features of these forms of expression compel literacy and English teachers to reconsider what constitutes the writing classroom so that relevance is promoted within contemporary communicative contexts.

Introduction

It is 10 am, Australian Eastern Standard time, and the latest global release of the *Civ Battle Royale* (CBR) (reddit, 2019) has just become available online. Thousands of members of the CBR community, located all over the world, viewing smartphones, tablets and computer screens, wait for their web browser to load the latest part in a story that has been unfolding one chapter a week for over two years. The story captures the events of a game involving 61 historically accurate civilisations playing against each other in an artificial intelligence environment. After thirty minutes of reading and viewing the screenshots and narration that accompany each chapter, users, young and old, log in to their reddit accounts and the digital writing begins.

This is not writing in the traditional sense. It is certainly not the way that most middle-years students experience writing in the literacy and English classroom. It is writing that is multimodal, combining digital text with images, videos and hyperlinks. It is fluid, not fixed, constantly evolving as each new contributor adds to the comments that follow the publication of a new chapter. Genres hybridise as commentary merges with narrative, discussion and explanatory discourse. Reading and writing paths become non-linear, and the communicative space is shared. All members of the CBR are authors. This is writing that is authentic, showing how young people’s identities become entwined with online worlds through literate digital practices (Hayes & Gee, 2010; Wilson & Rennie, 2019). This is writing in the digital age.

The notion that writing is a multifaceted literacy practice that requires more than the ability to use the printed word on the material page has become more mainstream and is now recognised within Australian curricula. Take, for example, the Australian Curriculum: English for Year 7, which states that students should communicate with a range of peers, teachers, individuals, groups and community members, through a range of face-to-face and online virtual/environments (ACARA, 2019). To support this communication, students are expected to produce a variety of written and multimodal texts, including through the use of new technology and new forms of communication,

like texting, emoticons and email (ACELA1528). There are references to analysis focused on visual texts, and to the value of experimenting with digital story-telling (ACELA1764). In terms of creating literature, students are encouraged to consider layout, colour and navigation, as they create literary texts (ACELT1805), and to use collaborative technologies to jointly construct, edit and publish multimodal texts, sensitive to audience and purpose (ACELY1726).

It would be easy to conclude from these curriculum descriptors that the gap between in-school and out-of-school writing is minimal. The reality is much different. As research can attest (Frawley & McLean Davies, 2015; Polesel, Dulfer & Turnbull, 2014; Polesel, Rice & Dulfer, 2014) classroom writing in the time of NAPLAN and other high-stakes senior English examinations has narrowed the writing possibilities. If school-based writing is to remain relevant, it cannot ignore what characterises digital forms of meaning-making so prevalent in students' informal writing worlds.

What follows is a brief review of the research which has opened up space for teachers to reconsider the nature of literate practices in their classrooms. This is followed by a close analysis of one authentic digital writing space, the CBR community, and the forms of digital writing that characterise this space. The aim is to focus on one feature of students' new literacies practice, digital writing, in the hope that revealing ontological shifts in how young people write themselves into being might help bridge the gap between home and school literacies.

The literature

Debates about school-based writing are certainly not new. The 1921 *Newbolt Report* on the state of English teaching in England revealed serious concerns about the way students were being prepared for a lifetime of literacy practice (Newbolt, 1924). In terms of composition instruction, the report described the typical writing classroom:

In many classes, it comes about that as often as the Composition time arrives, a subject is, as a matter of course, announced, and the children are required to write a full-dress composition on it. The teacher marks the mistakes, the children perhaps correct certain errors and re-write the words misspelt, and then set to work to write another composition (p. 74).

This approach was criticised by Newbolt for the way it tempered creative impulses and discouraged writing.

Recent reconceptualisations of writing reflect new ways of thinking about literacy, marked by a shift away from narrow standards and levels, which tend to be characterised by sets of rules formally and narrowly defined, and towards literacy in the plural sense, as distinct socioculturally meaningful practices through which language, and other semiotic resources, are leveraged (Gee, 1996; New London Group, 1996). The sociocultural approach contests the idea that literacy is something just done in schools (Gee, 2004, p. 74), recognising that literacy means many different things to many different people (Leu & Forzani, 2012, p. 75).

This shift from literacy to literacies, as well as the increasing role technology has played mediating literacy practices, has been captured by the term 'new literacies'. The 'new' of new literacies refers to both new 'technical stuff' and new 'ethos stuff' (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), which, in combination, permit new ways of producing, distributing, exchanging and receiving texts.

The new 'technical stuff' captures the rise of digital-electronic technologies, both hardware and software, and the global internet infrastructure that supports their connectedness. One example of this is the hypertext. Described by Snyder (1996) as comprised of digital material which creates the links, and the readers who decide which threads to follow, hypertexts encourage the rapid, non-sequential, non-linear, movement from one part of the text to another, and are produced through processes of co-construction. Reading and viewing are interspersed with acts of clicking, the result being that the user is presented with a new screen and often an entirely new topic, calling on readers to approach meaning construction in a different way (Patterson, 2000, p. 74), one which requires educators to rethink the

interconnectedness of reading and writing practices in the context of digital literacies. When combined with the ability of New Media technologies to easily integrate a range of semiotic systems together to create hybridised forms (Flew, 2005), think Smartphones and the apps that enable the creation of micro stories embedded with sound, graphics, and text, we are left with dynamic creative systems for communication (Hocks, 2003), which are in stark contrast to the traditional composition lesson that limits literate practice to that which can be achieved through pen and paper.

One of the consequences of new ‘technical stuff’ has been the development of new ‘ethos stuff’, a mindset resulting from engagement with new literacies and which has produced writers unburdened by the limits of formal publishing houses. This has empowered an entire generation of young people to connect their writing with others, beyond the limitations of time and geography. Writing practices associated with online fan-fiction, blogging, memes, social-media, video-making and media-sharing produce a shared communicative space where the rules and norms that govern social practice are more fluid and less abiding than those we might expect to see in typical classrooms (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007). As is evident in the account which opened this paper, and unlike the writing-for-assessment that characterises so much school-based composition, all writing is authentic and all writers are members of a writing community.

As a result of the combined effect of new ethos and new technological stuff, new forms of writing have become possible, realised through new technological possibilities and new attitudes towards textual production and sharing. Merchant’s (2007, p. 122) ten characteristics of writing on-screen capture some of these new literate practices. They are:

1. A move from the fixed to the fluid: the text is no longer contained between the covers or by the limits of the page.
2. Texts become interwoven in more complex ways through the use of hyperlinks.
3. Texts can easily be revised, updated, added to and appended.
4. Genres borrow freely, hybridise and mutate.
5. Texts can become collaborative and multi-vocal, with replies, links, posted comments and borrowing – the roles of readers and writers overlap.
6. Reading and writing paths are often non-linear.
7. Texts become more densely multimodal (as multimedia allows for a rich interplay of modes).
8. The communicative space is shared and location diminishes in significance as the local fuses with the global.
9. The impression of co-presence and synchronous engagement increases.
10. Boundaries begin to blur (work/leisure; public/ private; serious/frivolous).

While the need to prepare students for literacy practice in a digitally mediated world has been recognised in education policy for some time (MCEETYA, 2008), and most recently re-iterated in the Alice Springs (Mparntwe) Education Declaration (Council of Australian Governments Education Council, 2019), we are still coming to understand how the digital turn can be integrated into our classrooms (Mills, 2010), ensuring that the English classroom remains current..

As this body of research seeks to capture how the very act of writing is undergoing potentially fundamental changes (Alexander & Rhodes, 2018), there is a growing interest in the pedagogical implications of these shifts. As Hamilton concluded through an analysis of 150 digital writing syllabi, ‘digital writing teachers teach different types of writing in different types of ways in service of different types of interests of different kinds of other stakeholders’ (2019, p. 171). In terms of the impact on students, Nordmark’s (2017) work in secondary schools, investigating the relationship between writing pedagogy in the digital-writing classroom and issues of identity, social positioning and networking is noteworthy. The introduction of computers has changed student writing from an individual project, into complex collective projects.

Given the profound implications that the digital revolution has had on the artefacts, networks and communications that are now utilised for work and everyday life, a revolution which Grabhill and Hicks (2005) argue is just as much a social and cultural revolution, there is value in focusing closely on one contemporary site of digital literate practice, to analyse the types of writing present, and to consider how the literacy/English teacher might incorporate these into their teaching.

An authentic digital writing space

The reddit website represents a digital platform which allows users to submit a wide-range of content to the site, acting as a repository for an extraordinary diversity of digital production and consumption practices. A free-to-use discussion space, which does not employ age restrictions on users, the platform was the seventh most visited website in the USA and 17th most visited worldwide in 2019 (Ahrefs, 2019).

The Civ Battle Royale reddit page, www.reddit.com/r/civbattleroyale/, represents a space where communities of users follow and contribute to content related to the game *Civilization V* (Firaxis, 2010). A turn-based strategy game, *Civilization V* requires players to take control of civilisations, ancient and contemporary, and make decisions about the collection of resources, the settling of cities, the construction of buildings, and relations with other civilisation, including trade and declarations of peace and war. One scenario of the game has been designed so as to allow the game to run in an automated mode, with minimal human interference. A human user captures this gameplay in the form of screen shots and shares these with the reddit community which then produce various forms of content which is uploaded to the Internet.

In order to explore the literate practices which construct this community, I have employed Merchant's (2007) aforementioned ten 'characteristics of writing on-screen' to analyse five examples of writing from the CBR that have been captured and presented below.

A move from the fixed to the fluid

In its simplest form, the reddit space which hosts the CBR is a text. Rather than being limited by the confines of a printed page, with a clearly discernible beginning, middle and end, writing is less fixed and more fluid. The text unravels constantly as members of the community post threads. Every thread contributes to the text, as well as representing texts in their own right.

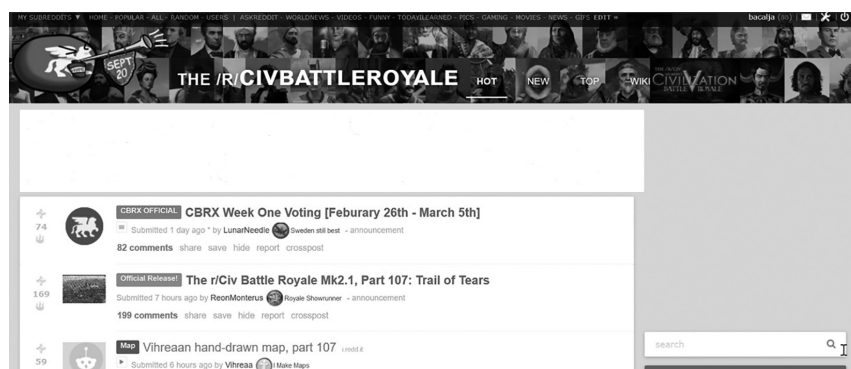


Figure 1. The CBR Wall

Texts in this space are accessible through the central wall, an organising place for the many threads which are started. A container for texts within texts, the central wall is always changing. The order of threads and comments evident in Figure 1 is determined by a system of 'upvoting', whereby users signal the value of a thread, causing that thread to appear towards the top of the page. Threads which have been posted more recently are also more likely to appear towards the top of the page. Additionally, some threads are tagged as 'sticky posts', deemed by the moderators to be of such importance that they should be fixed to the top of the wall. The end result is a text which is variable

in form, flexible in use, and shifting in response to the consumption and production practices of users.

Texts become interwoven in more complex ways through the use of hyperlinks

Notions of authorship are fractured as a result of writing practices which incorporate other texts into their very fabric. This possibility for fluid intertextuality is largely attributable to hyperlinks (Patterson, 2000; Snyder, 1996). Figure 2, below, captures this phenomenon, showing how a single wall thread, on this occasion relating to the release of a new ‘chapter’ of the game, becomes entwined through hyperlinks with the writing of other users. Consistent with Nordmark’s work (2017), the affordances of writing in this context encourage more collaborative and inter-connected text creation as users embed and link to other contributors’ works. Clicking on any of the hyperlinks seen in Figure 2 takes a viewer to another thread, adding to the original writing as different viewers’ selections produce different readings of the original post. In this way, hyperlinks allow both the creator and viewer of the text to create connections between writing. In this instance, a user can choose to begin with the chapter itself, or to check back to the ‘Last Chapter’ to remind themselves of last week’s events. They may prefer to listen to the audio narration of the chapter, or to view other related content. Like Nordmark’s (2017) work investigating what happens when secondary students compose through a computer, meaning-making is multi-authored as users construct their experience through the selection of hyperlinks that produce distinct interleaved combinations of other writings.

Hyperlinking builds connections between works on the site, but also to writing and media in the wider digital world. Links to other media-distribution sites, such as YouTube or Wikipedia, establish ever-more complex connections across time and space. Due to the almost infinite combinations of possible hyperlinks to follow, the text can take on an almost infinite number of forms. No two users are likely to experience the CBR in the same way.

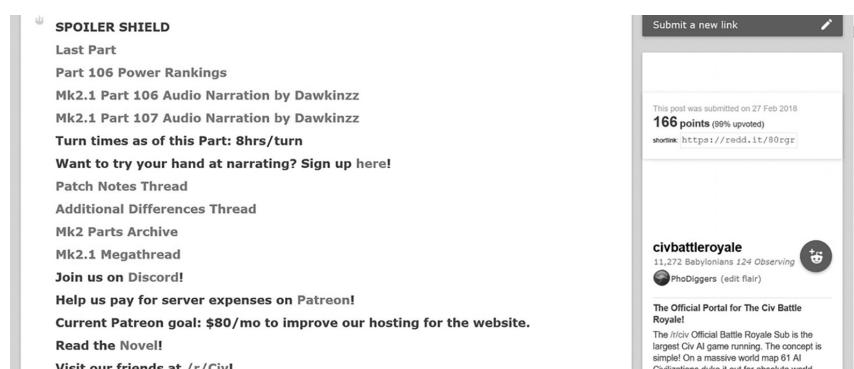


Figure 2. Hyperlinked writing in a CBR Thread

Texts can easily be revised, updated, added to and appended

Consistent with Snyder’s description of screen text as ‘fluid in the sense of being both a text in process and the process itself’ (1996, p. 11), in the CBR, writing can be expanded or contracted. Writing through the reddit platform allows users to easily edit, revise, and update their writing. Writing is never finished in the same sense that a published work is sent for printing or a student essay submitted for summative assessment. Threads and comments are easily, and frequently, amended. As opposed to school-based writing created for the purposes of assessment, fixed once it is received by its audience, writing from the CBR community contributes to a community of practice (Lave, 1991) through processes of review and revision, often in response to feedback from other members. Individual threads and the comments they contain are never really finished, as they remain open to revisions and edits at any time, as well as their partial or full integration into other texts, exposing such writing to further revision. Young people are already engaged in these forms of social digital text

production through their social media use. Bringing these forms into classrooms would create space to develop critical understandings about the technology mediates participation and communication in distinctive twenty-first century spaces.

Genres borrow freely, hybridise and mutate

Genres in the CBR are hybridised. Conventions and forms undergo metamorphosis at the hands of writers and creators, borrowing freely from styles of recount, narrative, instruction and argument so commonly applied as straightjackets to formal literacy learning.

One example of hybridity which captures the diversity of writing and creating produced for the CBR is the City Lore Map, see Figure 3. Created using Google Maps, the City Lore Map registers the location of every in-game city, as well as providing a brief written history. This writing draws on multiple genre conventions to synthesis knowledge about each city's in-game owners, the history of the city within the game, and links to the characteristics of the real-world city. As each new chapter of the game is released, members update the City Lore map to connect new in-game changes with real-world information. For example, Sydney's city lore description states (Google, 2018):

The intimidatingly large capital of the Domination of Straya, Sydney leads one of the largest empires on the Cylinder. Sydney's large, natural harbor looks out on the glittering Pacific Ocean and the endless Wobbegong Armada. The city was completely rebuilt after being nuked and briefly conquered by the vengeful Maori army. The nearby Blue Mountains still blow fallout-laden dust on the city during the dry season. The famous Cylindrical Theatre burned down in the first Maori bombing, but it has been rebuilt and still features daily shows of both classics and modern plays.

Combined with non-print based semiotic systems, such as in-game visual mapping and real-world geographic overlays, the informational recount narrative that ensues is a product of collaborative production (any member of the community can update the lore of each city as the game progresses) and incorporates various modes of representation, such as image, colour, writing, layout and typography to name a few. These hybridised forms break free from the genres that can stifle creativity, and have been taken to extremes in the NAPLAN era.

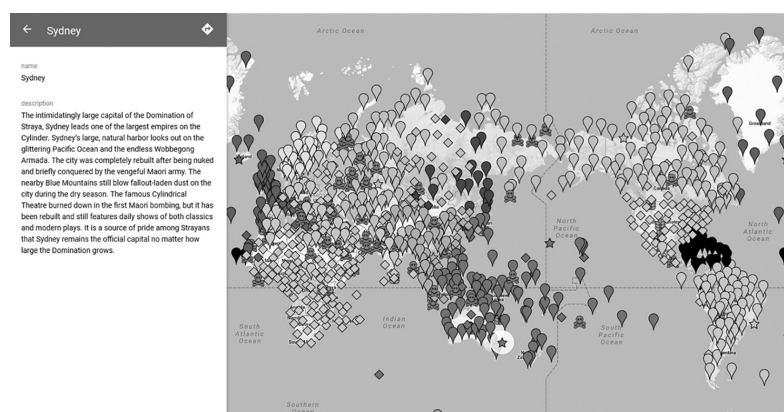


Figure 3. Hybridised genres in the CBR City Lore Map

Texts can become collaborative and multi-vocal

The new technology stuff of reddit provides the tools for collaborative meaning-making. Figure 2 is an excellent example of such collaborative work. While the thread is produced by a single author, each hyperlink refers the viewer to the writing of others. Both the new thread, and the additional writing associated with embedded hyperlinks, are also open to comments and discussion. Thus, the experience of engaging with the original thread becomes multi-vocal, as many different writers' views and content are consumed.

There is also a conflation of the roles of reader and writer, as users frequently comment on the posts which they are reading, affording them the status of reader and writer. The thread becomes the sum of its parts, as each additional comment informs the unfolding text. The end result is a space less individuated, and more collaborative, distributed, and participatory, characteristics of new literacies which facilitate dialogue and conversation across time and space (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006), and which reflect a form of dynamic role switching that students will need to understand for post-schooling success.

Reading and writing paths are often non-linear

To understand participation in the CBR reddit page requires moving beyond rigid ideas about when reading stops, and writing starts. The CBR community integrates processes of reading and writing. A user must provide a title for their thread. They can also add text which appears below this title. This text can include links to other threads, sites, content, or media platforms. The thread itself can be tagged using a range of options (discussion, civball, original content, map, meta). If a thread risks revealing story elements that have recently been made available to the community via a new chapter, then the thread can also be tagged 'Spoiler'. A user can also add flairs to their writing which reveals their affiliation to a particular civ, a form of digital sports-team affiliation, and which will likely inform how their thread is experienced by others. The audience to such writing has multiple entry points as well as almost infinite exit opportunities.

The 'technology' stuff of the CBR reddit page makes engagement with writing multifaceted. Users may enter the text at many points. They may begin with the first thread at the top of the page. Given these posts are often 'sticky' posts, tied to the top of the web-page for up to a week, it is likely that members of the community will ignore these posts and seek to 'begin' their reading elsewhere. Users who prefer the writing of particular contributors can easily locate their work through a search query. Others simply scan the titles of threads before clicking on items of interest, a combination of surface and deep reading. Hyperlinks similarly contribute to the non-linearity of the reading experience, allowing a user to move across threads and content as they choose.

Figure 4 details some of these types of writing. The map, created by user 'Vihreaa', is embedded in a new thread. The creation of the thread includes elements such as the title, the main graphic, text describing the graphic (off-screen), a 'spoiler' tag, to warn viewers that it reveals details about the next chapter, the user's affiliation, symbolised by the aqua blue circle, and the flair 'I Make Maps', which identifies the types of contributions made by Vihreaa. Text indicating that the thread has 24 comments indicates the presence of other users' writing and this degree of popularity is also likely to impact user engagement with the content. Knowledge about how language works in these digital spaces, such as the relationship between iterations of reading and writing and various meaning-making systems, is not easily assessed through standardised testing, but nonetheless, reflects a type grammar that is relevant.

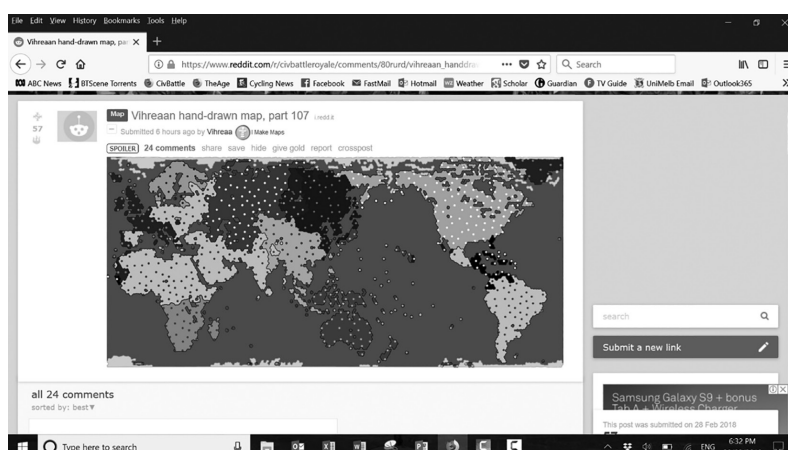


Figure 4. An example of non-linear reading and writing paths on the CBR reddit page

Texts become more densely multimodal

Recognising the view that language should be seen as just one of numerous modes which can be leveraged for the purposes of communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; New London Group, 1996), it becomes evident that almost all of the elements of the reddit CBR are multimodal. Meaning-making, from this perspective, goes beyond the purely linguistic, and includes the visual, audio, gestural and spatial modes of meaning that have become increasingly integrated in everyday media and cultural practices (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 166).

The production of densely multimodal texts is supported by the reddit platform which facilitates the quick and easy integration of multiple modes of representation. Figure 5 is an example of such affordances. Each week, a select group of experienced insiders rank each of the civilisations from the game in terms of their likelihood to win the game. These rankings are combined with other visual and print based material to produce 'The Power Rankings', a series of slides, each representing one civilisation and its progress in the game. The slides are presented in order, from least to most likely to win. Figure 5 shows the use of linguistic resources, including a title, a description of the image on the slide and a detailed paragraph contextualising Korea's ranking, combined with other modes, in particular, visuals. The large central photo, the colour scheme, the cartoon illustration, and their arrangement on the screen, all create opportunities to communicate meaning to the audience. When these elements are combined with the option to listen to audio-recordings of some content found on the CBR site, we can see the multimodal affordances of this creative space, and the importance of ensuring that students are taught to be producers of texts that go beyond the printed word.

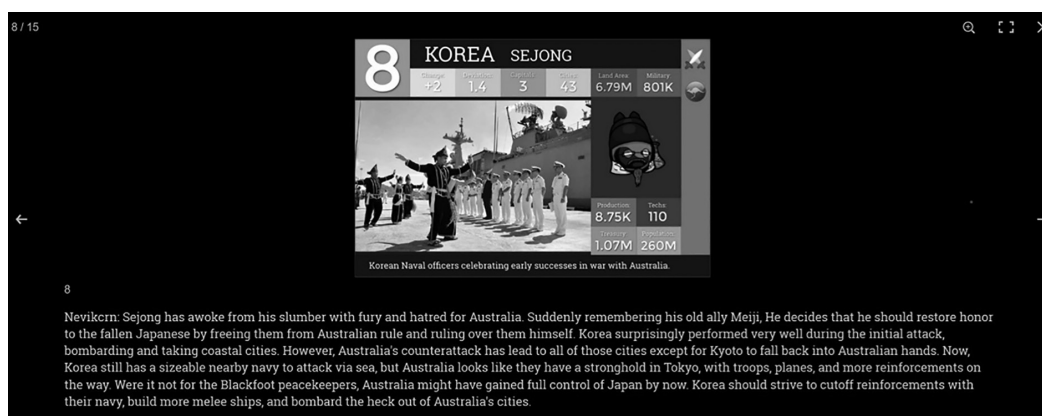


Figure 5. Densely multimodal productions are common in the CBR community

The communicative space is shared and location diminishes in significance

Much has been said about the democratic possibilities associated with internet-enabled communicative practices (Dahlberg, 2001; Kress, 1997; Willinsky, 2014). In the CBR, no single user has control over the communicative space. Unlike formal schooling, which tends to privilege the knowledge of one individual, the teacher, over others, the students, the distributed aspect of knowledge in the CBR welcomes the expertise of all members. Distributed cognition is spread out across contexts and systems (Jenkins, Clinton, Purushotma, Robison & Weigel, 2009). Gee describes this as the 'distributed principle' (2003, p. 211), which characterises many technologies that facilitate social practices, whereby remote experts whose knowledge may be useful in solving a problem become accessible.

Distributed intelligence extends throughout technological and sociocultural environments (Clark, 2003), and in the digital age is facilitated by new 'ethos stuff' which encourages wide participation and the active promotion of writing as a means to facilitate a community of practice (Lave, 1991). Writing in this space, and the subsequent sharing of these works, produces a socially shared cognition. The geographic location of members diminishes in importance as the emphasis shifts to their contributions

to the community. This prompts many questions about how we can leverage the proactive attitudes towards online participation that so many of our students bring with them to schooling.

The impression of co-presence and synchronous engagement increases.

The structure of the reddit page gives the impression that users are engaging in writing that is occurring in the same time and place for all community members, encouraging engagement. The concentration of writing and reading within the confines of the CBR wall, in combination with algorithms that order and reorder threads and comments based on their popularity, create a form of dialogue that ignores the temporal and geographic distances between users. Significant cultural and national differences among members are not obstacles to shared writing or sharing writing. Instead, the collaborative space encourages an ongoing conversation, ameliorating the reality of users in many locations, but writing in one space. As the concept of blended classrooms proliferates, and students are brought into digital spaces for formal learning, the enablers and inhibitors of these spaces will need to be considered.

Boundaries begin to blur

The internet can have the effect of reducing hierarchical boundaries between participants (Riel & Polin, 2004), and inviting writing that disturbs binary literacy constructs (like work/play, serious/frivolous). For example, while much of the writing on the CBR is intended to entertain, other, more serious writing, is also present. Writing orientated towards explaining complex technical modifications associated with the game, sophisticated photo and video editing processes necessary for the creation of content, and even historical writing associated with many of the 61 civilisations in the game, are frequently posted alongside content intended to amuse. Furthermore, while the wall is a public space, a chat system allows private communication between users. Thus, boundary crossing between public and private writing is facilitated.

The desire to enter this writing space and engage in a diversity of literate practices requires an investment of self. The characteristics of writing on screen discussed above demonstrate how the digital world has the potential to produce authentic, purposeful, and representative of communicative practice that is socially and culturally situated. Ultimately, the type of boundary crossing performed by the CBR community captures the types of boundary crossing we should be seeking in our classrooms, where the literacy of schooling is relevant, reflects students' real world experiences, and seeks to support them to better understand how that world is constructed.

Conclusion

Contributions to the CBR, like the contributions of middle years writers to various online social media spaces, are a product of bricolage, the construction and sharing of writing in digital spaces by drawing on a diverse range of resources. While Luke is right to describe teachers and students working together in public schools as bricoleurs 'adapting, modifying, and constructing available resources, strategies, and texts to shape the everyday, enacted curriculum' (2012, p. 10), the disciplinary forces acting upon teachers which force them to privilege print-based writing, does so at the expense of the digital bricolage.

This paper is interested in the type of writing which characterise digital writing and the implications this might have for writing instruction in schools. In advocating for a version of school-based literacy instruction that reimagines writing, we need a rhetoric for digital writing that does three things:

1. Rejects narrow ideas about of writing that reduce it to issues of style, syntax and coherence produced through pen and paper.
2. Accepts that information and communication technologies enable new types of writing, publishing and communication.

3. Encourages pedagogical interventions that adapt to shifting literacy practices (Grabill & Hicks, 2005).

As Kinzer and Leu (2017, p. 1563) argue, we will need to consider how we reconfigure classrooms to enable the teaching of new technologies and encourage the ethos of new literacies. It is not enough for students to talk about digital tools and new literacies, they must be able to try them, experiment with them, play with them and work in social spaces.

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