Language Arts Journal of Michigan

Volume 23
Issue 1 *Digital Technology*

Article 9

2007

Smash Cars Accelerates Emergent Writing to Reading: Debunking Myths of Software Games and Literacy

Rose Cherie Reissman
Director of Balanced Literacy by FutureKids and of Museum in School Program

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/lajm

Recommended Citation
Reissman, Rose Cherie (2007) "Smash Cars Accelerates Emergent Writing to Reading: Debunking Myths of Software Games and Literacy," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 23: Iss. 1, Article 9.
Available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1138

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Language Arts Journal of Michigan by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Smash Cars Accelerates Emergent Writing to Reading: Debunking Myths of Software Games and Literacy

Rose Cherie Reissman
Director of Balanced Literacy by FutureKids and of Museum in School Program

As someone who learned to read when movies and television were the media formats that were supposed to distract children from becoming readers, I am always amused by the popular myth that software games and interactive, child-centered online games will prevent young children from becoming enthralled readers and writers. From my experiences as a child and as a teacher/educator, I believe that these games may enhance the opportunities children have to become readers and writers.

I grew up in the age when a new technology (television) was under attack for reducing children's ability to read and write the printed word. Yet, watching popular television shows like *Bewitched*, *Lassie*, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *I Spy*, *Twilight Zone*, *Dr. Kildare* and *Masterpiece Theater* in no way deterred me from loving to read and write. Indeed, I did my homework on the rug in front of the television set, but then read books with a flashlight late at night. In addition to logging many hours watching educational and pop television, I started seeing two movies a week at the theatre. All of that cinematic, small screen, and print storytelling inspired me to more ideas than I could put in my black composition notebook. After reading books or news articles, I often scripted my own movie treatments, using insights on perspectives from my movie going experiences. I am living proof that a lifelong reader can be nurtured by television and film. How else to explain the renewed and enhanced readership for books made into a films, and many of these predate Oprah Winfrey's deliberate book club selections by over thirty years?

Within the last 15 years the accessibility, availability and kinesthetic lure and enthrallment of software games has come to be seen by many educators, some librarians, and certainly pop culture analysts as the latest and greatest new technology threat to raising a next generation of engaged readers and writers. Diligent parents and caregivers ban or severely limit child access to online and purchased software games. Schools keep it off library computer hard drives. Some schools even go so far as to ban use of hand held software or personal software during break periods.

As a professional literacy educator with an expertise in emergent literacy who worked directly with 750 emergent learners in public and private schools through my work as a literacy consultant for at-risk students in public schools in New York City, I often hear concerned early childhood educators and reading teachers lament the fact that captivating streaming videos, interactive pulsating game sites, CDs, living books, e-books, and Broadway musical-type stories deter young children from becoming fascinated by the *printed* (although non-kinesthetic and in most cases non-audio) book texts.

Given my own experiences as a child, where the more films and the more television shows I watched, the richer the perspectives and storylines I noted down in my personal, black composition notebook, and my delight in being a pre-Siskel & Ebert critic, issuing abundant viewer response statements about films (even when not asked), I had a gut feeling that these dire predictions and fears were groundless. Beyond the gut feeling, I had already begun using scenarios, plots and characters from software games, such as *Pacman*, *Pokemon*, *Diego*, *Webkins*, and *Barbie* as inspiration for student writings. I knew as an educator that tapping students' fascination with these characters, scenarios, and even pacing would propel even reluctant writers into writing. They didn't see it as "writing" but rather as "talking about what they loved" on a computer file. Perhaps this was just the case with middle school students, which was the level where I had first used this technique as a motivator.

Exploring Software Games as Motivators through Action Research

I decided to conduct some action research with two young emergent readers as part of their parents' desire for them to start "reading" before they entered kindergarten- just prior to their fifth birthdays. Their parents (and many pre-K educators) are looking to have children demonstrate recognition of the alphabet, basic conventions of print, and develop an ability to recognize and fill in rhymes and phonetically put together simple words. This beginning of constructing meaning, with tremendous help from the adult reader, is equivalent to a child taking his or her first baby steps.

I worked with both of the emergent readers for an initial five private sessions, consisting of fifty minutes individual learning time (both boys were close to their fifth birthdays). The boys, David and Vittorio, had tested above the ninety-fifth percentile on their ERB (Educational Record Bureau) tests for kindergarten admissions. For those who have not had to live through the horror of accompanying or "coaching" a child not yet five for this pivotal life-changing exam, the ERB test is a an assessment of a young learner's academic ability for kindergarten placement in private, independent schools. It is the pre-K equivalent of the SAT, although the scores are even more important in a private school deciding whether or not to admit a child to one of its few kindergarten placements. It uses as its primary scale for intelligence the Wechsler Assessment Primary Scale, and "grades" the child as compared to others of the same age in subtests that include verbal, motor, and mathematical problem solving performances.

Test-takers' parents are given the scores in percentile form. They can either joyously celebrate acceptance with an above the ninety percentile mark or lament their child's failure to get admitted to kindergarten because of a low score (which could be attributed to a host of non-academic factors, e.g., a shy child not meshing with the examiner, or tired child, etc.). When I was asked independently by David's and Vittorio's concerned mothers to check in on her child to determine why such an admittedly and "tested" bright child "did not like" to read or to be read to, I initially tried to get each of them to give up any "tutoring" or "outside " support for such a bright child who was intellectually far advanced beyond his peers. Yet, I decided that it would useful to the family and helpful to me as an emergent literacy educator to work with these youngsters independently for an extended period of quality one on one time.

Case Study Participants: Presenting the "Drivers"

David is from a family where his mother, an Israeli native, speaks Hebrew and his father, a Bronx-born New Yorker, speaks English. The caregiver for the household speaks fluent Spanish. The result is that David, born in Manhattan, speaks and understands Hebrew, Spanish, and English—prior to his fifth birthday. While he demonstrates familiarity and conversational ease in all three languages, his grammatical and syntactic construction in English reflect the fact that two languages other than English dominate his core conversations (with his Israeli mother and his Spanish caregiver).

David's mother worried that given his obvious conversational skills and high test scores, he needed to develop the vocabulary and the language presentation skills necessary to be the head of the kindergarten class. Her biggest fear was that if he is not "reading" at least first-start stories by the time he gets to kindergarten, he would be "behind" many others in his class, who enter "reading." She would grow upset when he stated that he does not like "reading," but "loves" computer games. She, like many other mothers, compared him to his eight-year old sister, who at his age was very responsive to the reading process.

In contrast, although David did not appear responsive to reading, he demonstrated intense focus and manual dexterity as he sat transfixed by the popular racing car game called *Midtown Madness* (http://www.mm2c.com). In addition to the rich sound effects and animation tempos of this fast moving game (wherein the player picks a vehicle and sails around, over, under, and through bridges, grass, fences, sidewalks, and other "normal" non vehicle friendly surfaces to an unspecified destination at top speed), this online *NASCAR* underage driver's tech program often is accompanied by the

"drivers" shouting their own monologues detailing the stories they are experiencing as they "play" at being a part of this cyber safe road game. David would act out his racing car story script as he focused on the race. When his mother attempted to redirect this focus to reading, he pointedly refused to leave the computer. To her dismay, he only stopped playing Midtown Madness to switch over to *Kids Pix*, which he used as an art studio to create Jackson Pollack-style images.

Vittorio, the eldest in his family, comes from a family environment where many languages are routinely spoken. By necessity, he speaks English, German (his caregiver's and the baby's nurse's language—he has an infant six-month old sister), Italian (his father's native language) and Swedish (his mother's native language). Since his family owns a chain of restaurants which tourists frequent, he has adapted his father's cosmopolitan manner in welcoming guests to the family's restaurant through his own speech patterns. Although his Swedish mother and his German caregiver read to him in grammatically correct (but heavily accented) English, he shows little interest in reading per se. In Vittorio's case, unlike that of David, whose mother's read-aloud is delightful and inviting with pauses to include David in the storytelling, including picture walks and predicting the next pages, Vittorio's mother was never read to in her native language and learned how to read aloud expressively to her child through a tutorial with me.

However, according to his mother, Vittorio would stop her in a mid-story read aloud to look out of his twelfth floor home apartment window to count and to name the various cars that drove by. Similarly, when he and his mother sat in one of the father's restaurants in mid-town, he would often rush close to the exit door to spy the various makes of cars speeding along and those being parked. Like David, who also was not engaged by his mother's highly expressive reading aloud, Vittorio demonstrated a tremendous interest in the Midtown Madness 2, the installed interactive racecar driving through an urban setting game, precisely because this game literally places the child in the driver's seat.

Observations of the "Drivers" as Emergent Readers

Based on my observations of K-2 learners in public inner city schools and learning centers, I find that many boys are fascinated with racecar driving. Both David and Vittorio, who had not met, were typical of other boys who played with this software (there were a few girls who selected it), in that as they played they would talk or scream out the thoughts or dialogue, the driver would shout as he navigated the city track vicariously through the game.

Observing the "Drivers." First, I spent thirty minutes or so observing David and Vittorio separately as they sat in small groups of three learners and learned how to use Kids Pix. I noted that each boy enjoyed socializing with his same gender age peers. Beyond the fact that both showed task completion and advanced motor coordination with the mouse, plus visual tracking skills for their ages, they were each totally "into" the selected "free time" software, Midtown Madness2. They could have ended the tutorial session at any interval, say after five minutes, but often stayed up to thirty minutes and had to be forced to go home. This showed advanced focus for these two five-year-olds.

The software simulates split second timing, decision making, thrills, jolts and consequences of driving, and puts the "driver" in control through his mouse. The game, therefore, is player-centered, much like successful reading and writing. For a player with excellent visual, motor, focus, concentration and "what if" skills, this is a wonderful exercise that enhances those capacities. Based on my observations of these two eagerly emergent car drivers, but seemingly reluctant emergent readers and listeners, I decided to try a "Writing about Racing to Reading" approach with each.

The Writing about Racing Approach to Reading

Rather than forcibly or gently pulling the child away from the engrossing software game, I paradoxically encouraged David and Vittorio to remain seated playing the software game. Instead of interrupting each child's voiced scripting of his "story" or role play of himself in the character of the Midtown Madness car driver racing through a city and by passing barriers, I simply sat near the child, listened and

talked aloud, or narrated, his story, I gently directed the child's attention to the monitor of the adjacent computer with my word file entry on display, increasing the font size 200% so they could easily read it.

David takes the Wheel. David was familiar enough with stories from his mother's reading to immediately volunteer his first story, "About Power Ranger." Although David, whose personality was a very declarative one, with strong likes or dislikes, enough of his story telling and exposure to the formats of the books had sunk in for him to feel positive about his "being an author." In addition, he had never heard a read-aloud about Power Rangers, so he was ready to "own" that kind of story by naming it.

David's First "Write" to Read. I asked David to follow his narrated words on the screen with his mouse as I read aloud—he had superb mouse control from his efforts with Midtown Madness and Kids Pix3. He began *voicing* his story as I read, initially sharing the reading and then interacting with me by telling me certain lines had to end with exclamation points–such as "and he blasted off!" As I began to see his eyes follow the cursor, plus light up when at his command, I placed in the exclamation point, I decided to ask him to input short words from his own dictated narrative such as: *to*, *is*, *it*, *out*, and *good*.

At four years old, David was hardly familiar with the placement of the letters, and it took him some time for him to locate these key letters. But he was a quick learner. By the time we were eighty words or so into his piece, he was much quicker to input his words, and he began sounding out the words with me. When I paused to allow him to interact, he was able to do so easily. By the third opportunity to complete the words on his own narrated story, he smiled at me and said, "My Power Ranger Story," acknowledging that the story was made up of his own dictated words.

David's "fan" fare- reader response. I had other adults and children, who read on their own, handwrote stories, and made art, offer comments for David's "Power Ranger" effort, which also included a picture of David with stickers and a shoebox self-crafted with a "Power Ranger" setting. When David returned for his second session, he observed with pleasure the handwritten (deliberate on my part) comments and drawings in response to his story. On his own, the reluctant-to-be-read-to student asked me to read what the comments were. Apparently he was happy with a read-aloud if it was from a response to his work as an author.

> *The game, therefore, is player-centered, much like successful reading and writing. For a player with excellent visual, motor, focus, concentration and "what if" skills, this is a wonderful exercise that enhances those capacities.*

I had him use his finger to point to the text as we shared the reading of the short comments, using phonetic constructs and his index finger to follow the words. David was happy to dictate letters to what I termed "his readers." Now he knew the routine of having me keyboard his comments. He was eager to do his "d" for David words and short words. His "speed" was accelerated.

Vittorio. Like David, Vittorio was totally into Midtown Madness. He immediately suggested he would write about Luigi, the red car—a nice mix of the pop culture key character from the animated movie *Cars* with the cars of the game. Although Vittorio did not demonstrate David's *knowing* ownership of his story, he did respond to questions about what Luigi was doing and thinking and feeling as I asked. He showed me he had already superimposed his face over that of a red Ferrari as part of his technology literacy computer graphics training.

David and Vittorio

Both David and Vittorio spoke loudly while telling stories, making connections for them alone as they played. I "heard" the stories. As a teacher of reading and writing, I recognized a hook to reading through the software in these verbalizations. By this time both were conscious and

"proud" of their stories with comments from unknown readers. David showed them to his mother, sister, and other friends he proudly brought to the center. David had a separate binder for his works with me. Vittorio used his own stories as a jumping off point for online research using *Google* to find images about buses, trains and cars. Based on this research, he happily sounded out "hard" bus names and car models.

David focused on his author tasks. I asked for a title for this story. This time he immediately responded "Smash Cars." His own title—not the name of the software Midtown Madness, which he knew well, documenting that he was developing a David story. First he dictated what was happening in the game. Next I followed the same procedure, asking him to help me enter periods and read aloud his story, so I could make certain that I had gotten it "right." When we shared the writing, he sounded out "cool" the first time, but by its second appearance he recognized it and *read* it on his own.

Conclusion

Like a technology-driven version of the scene in Helen Keller's autobiography where she makes the water-word-reality literacy connection, David and Vitorrio almost a century later, connected to literacy through using the software and the word file. For example, David not only read with delight his own stories—with assistance from me, he then went to the floor where I had a fish-themed picture book and *asked* to "read that book!" Although at that moment we had already spent almost an hour together, he immediately and joyously demonstrated his "new" ability to decode phonetically and syntactically an unfamiliar story. His mother reported that that evening he asked her to read aloud his "two stories" and reader comments. He proudly showed her he could "read" his own story and words in a printed book not of his authoring.

Both David and Vitorrio may not have realized it, but they had just signed into the circle of readers and writers, fast tracked by software and Microsoft word files (of dictated-partially student input—at least some letters and punctuation) documents! I worked with both boys for a total of about ten hours (or ten sessions) spaced over a three-month period. However, the crucial literacy breakthroughs from "I hate reading" to "my stories," "my book," and "can I borrow that book?" ("If you show you can share reading it with me" was the answer), occurred after just 5 sessions, 2 stories and perhaps 3 handwritten responses to a story by an adult or peer unknown to David or Vitorrio.

Suggested Applications. Here are some indicators to be used en route to literacy through software games of those who declare, "I don't like reading": Take *no* for an answer and *don't fight it*. Watch them negotiate the software. Ask them to say what the key character or object or action is. Note or enter what is being said by the player like a reporter or a secretary. Then read it back to the child, or deliberately make a mistake in the reading so you can be "corrected." Then have the "author" check it by *reading it aloud with you*. Get the "author" to *name* the story. Get it read. Get the author-reader to sign it or make a drawing on it.

Let the life long literacy run begin!

Ready ....Set. Flags down...The race is on!

Every reader, writer and software enthusiast can be in the literacy circle!

About the Author

Dr. Rose Cherie Reissman is the President of the New York City Association of Teachers of English and the Director of the Museum in School Program. She is a published author, literacy consultant, teacher researcher, and the curriculum writer for KidsWrite, a student publishing-on-demand company.