Gaming Culture and Digital Literacy: 
*Inspiration and Audience*

Abstract
This paper documents an exploratory study of the range of digital literacies involved in the playing of a fantasy role play game and in the fan production it inspires. For this study, the game was theorised as a multimodal text, and game play as a social activity. A brief review of the literature relevant to this theorisation is followed by a consideration of the range and variety of associated fan production published on a fan website related to a chosen game. Interviews conducted online with six active producers and consumers of this fan production explore the motivation behind this creative activity. Outcomes are then related to the little available research into fan production in Anglophone game communities, and the implications of such activity for creative production in formal learning contexts are considered.

**Key words**
games • digital literacy • multimodal texts • fanfiction

Introduction
Whether the importance of digital games is measured in terms of financial impact or numbers of players there is no doubt that this new media form has become a major leisure activity. In 2004 game software sales in Europe as a whole amounted to 5.6 billion Euros (ELSPA, 2005) and the US the market reached some $7 billion, compared to film at $9 billion (ESA, 2005). Many reports (Becta, 2001, Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004, Williamson and Facer, 2004) document the importance of digital games in youth culture. An average American teenager will have spent 10,000 hours playing computer games by the time he/she completes compulsory schooling (Carrington, 2004). Gaming is also an important adult leisure choice and the average age of a gamer rose to 30 in 2004 (ESA, 2005).
Researchers such as Gee (2003, 2004) and Jenkins (2004) argue that playing digital games is a far from trivial practice. Gee (2003) describes games as “multimodal texts”, which combine words, graphics, sounds, music, signals and so on. He argues that while playing such a game, children are learning to participate in a particular “semiotic domain”, a term he uses to mean “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g. oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (p. 18). Further, Gee argues that researchers must go beyond the interaction between players and game interfaces, and look at the interaction among players if we are to truly understand the importance of digital games to learning. Research into the wider social context of game playing indicates that computer games are often a facilitator, promoting collaboration to conquer the games, discussion about the games and even reflection on the games (Becta, 2001, Williamson and Facer, 2004). However, until recently few researchers have looked at these broader aspects of game related culture. What research there is restricted to an examination of these practices in an Anglophone context (Black, 2005, Robison, 2004).

This paper reports on an exploratory research study focusing on the relationships between a game as multimodal text and various fan productions inspired by a game and shared via a related online fan community. A brief review of the key literature on the concepts of a game as a multimodal interactive text, and of game play as social in nature is offered as a context to this current study. The study looks at a community of players who enjoy the Chinese game series *Chinese Paladin* (hereafter referred to as *Pal* and in particular those who are inspired to create their own stories, poems, music and artwork based on the games, and to share these through a dedicated website. The game as an intertextual, non-linear multimodal artefact is first described, a short account of a key fan website and the fan productions it hosts follows, then the motivations and productions of a group of 6 active contributors are explored through internet relay chat and email interviews.

**Computer Games as Interactive, Multimodal Texts**

It is now common practice to regard any cultural artefact from a picture or a dress code to a piece of computer software or a website as a text (Kücklich, 2003). Print literature is still the dominant form of text taught in schools, with perhaps a little film and TV and some multimedia (Zancanella et al. 2000). However, Gee (2004) suggests that computer games, used appropriately, can nourish the soul just as poetry and literature did in an earlier age.

Among all the genres of digital games, those within the interactive story category share the most narrative elements with traditional forms of texts like novels and films in that they have recognisable characters and plots. However, unlike reading a book or watching a movie, playing digital games allows the “reader” to enter the narrative and become part of the story. When asked about books and computer games one child expressed the views of a
generation when he replied “Video games are better than books because you can be a player in games and you just have to read books” (March and Millard, 2000). Furthermore, a feedback loop between players/readers and games/texts arises when a player enters the story. The player controls the progress of the game as each action elicits a response, which in turn provokes a new reaction from the player, and so on (Friedman, 2002). This also leads to the concept of “agency” within the game since the player can take meaningful action and see the results of decisions and choices but of course, the degree of agency depends on the complexity of the game (Zancanella et al. 2000).

Digital games are multimodal in that they combine written and spoken language, images, graphics, and symbols with sound. Written language no longer holds the prime place in such multimodal texts although it is still used extensively to build narrative; visual imagery is paramount. This presents particular challenges to players, as they are required to decode the meaning of specific signs, symbols and images, which are integral to each game (Gee, 2003). There is a tendency among at least some players of computer games to attend to graphical information and give it primacy over other forms (Carrington, 2004).

Music also has an important communicative role in digital games since it is used together with other modalities to convey meaning (Gee, 2003). Music here cannot simply be regarded as a form of expression within the domain of aesthetics as it is in many other aspects of today’s life (Kress, 2000). For example, in many computer games a piece of stirring and scary music will be presented as the player approaches a potential hazard in an otherwise benign environment.

In order to engage with the interactive multimodal text that is a game, Gee (2003 pp. 13) points out that players “are learning a new literacy”. Moreover, it is a literacy in all kinds of representational forms that are important in 21st century communication environments.

Gaming Culture – Social Contexts of Game Playing

As many commentators have noted (e.g. Tobin, 1998, McFarlane et al. 2002, Squire, 2004), playing games is far from the isolated, solitary activity that it was often supposed to be. Thus research on computer games as texts should not be limited to the game interface and interaction between games and players. On the contrary, these texts should be regarded as “mediating artefacts”, which may promote various kinds of social practices and activities (Squire, 2004).

Two recent reports (Becta, 2001, Kirriemuir and McFarlane, 2004) on the educational potential of computer games recognise that games are often observed to stimulate discussion by providing authentic contexts for collaboration between classmates. “The Sims” is cited as an example to show “discussion (related to play) focused not just on how to use the software but on issues of science, government and citizenship. Specific issues such as alternative types of energy, pollution, planning of facilities and dealing with traffic con-
gestion were raised for debate. Such group collaboration can help individuals to develop self-confidence coupled with respect for others. The games, as one teacher puts it, acted as “platforms for social interaction” (Becta, 2001).

Learning is a social activity, and computers can support the social construction of knowledge, with some games providing environments that demand collaboration of the people using them (Greenfield, 1984). Tobin (1998) concluded that boys’ games-play was not simply a process of “playing the game” but was embedded in social interactions. Despite such findings little attention has been paid to the wider social practices surrounding game playing (Williamson and Facer, 2004). In some cases it could be argued that discussion and collaboration emerging through game play and various kinds of reflection activities are as important as the game itself (Squire, 2004). Gee (2003) notes that players purposefully gather into informal “affinity groups” with shared interests in games, in which knowledge and expertise are shaped, enriched and expanded through the interconnections between all members of the group. The development of the Internet and computer-mediated communication means that “affinity groups” are no longer localised entities. People with the same interest can gather from every corner of the world.

In ongoing research, Robison has found various kinds of reflection activities within these online groups. She argues that by modifying objects and characters, creating different forms of digital texts which are then shared, game players “write” their game playing experiences multimodally (Robison, 2004). From a media studies perspective, the texts of various kinds created by game players could be regarded as fan production. Therefore, the concept of “active audience” from media studies is important here. Jenkins (1992) argues that readers of popular texts like movies and TV series may transform their reading experience into a rich and complex participatory culture. Consumers of popular culture like television shows and movies engage in various productive activities, which range from just talking and gossiping to creating different forms of artefacts in order to express their feelings and opinions. Active audiences have long been well-known for their enthusiasm, productivity and creativity (Hills, 2002).

The Internet raises the visibility of fan production. Previously relatively private activities can be transferred into a public arena – online fan communities where massive audiences provide motive and encouragement for creative work. Moreover, the interactive affordance of fan web sites mean that a fan could go beyond his/her individual ability and benefit from others’ reactions, critiques and knowledge (Chung et al. 2004).

Fanfiction

Fanfiction refers to original works of fiction based on forms of media such as television shows, movies, books, music, and videogames. “In order to count as fanfiction, a text must be derivative; however, the extent to which an author relies on the preexisting media
framework is flexible and often a point of negotiation within the community”. (Jenkins, 1992) In her research on Cardcapter.com, an online fanfiction-based community, Black (2006) found over 20,000 Final Fantasy video game-related fictions and approximately 107,000 Harry Potter-based texts.

At the same time as fanfiction has proliferated, many educators, policy makers and researchers have acknowledged difficulties in the development of school-based literacy skills. The UK Literacy Strategy (see Department for Education and Skills, 2005) and the US No Child Left Behind policy (see Department for Education, 2002) both attempt to address this problem. In China, Han (2005) reports that first language literacy learning is not attractive to many learners. Students’ lack of motivation in school settings may be attributed to the inauthentic conditions that occur when tasks are not set within larger social and communication frames. Yet writing becomes enjoyable when there is an interest in the topic and things the author wants to write about (Bruning and Horn, 2000). Moreover, there is substantial evidence to show that students’ sense of audience has a positive influence on their attitudes towards writing tasks and on the quality of writing they produce (Davison and Dowson, 1998). The creativity such authentic engagement can evoke is readily evidenced by browsing any fanfiction site.

A feature of fanfiction pointed out by Robison is its intertextuality, “the potentially complex ways in which meanings (such as linguistic meanings) are formed through relationships to other texts (real or imaginary), text types (discourses or genres), narratives, and other modes of meaning” (New London Group, pp. 80). Obviously the connection between the original media source and fanfiction itself is one kind of intertextuality. However, the intertextual connections extend far beyond the original media source. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to create fictions based on one computer game while borrowing characters or plots from other popular books or movies. The composition process becomes easier when there is a framework to follow (Robison, 2004). Additionally, the digital game itself is placed within an intertextual world of related products such as books, comics, magazines and films (March and Millard 2000, Ito et al. 2005). These intertextual connections play a crucial role in the creative and discursive practices of design in online fanfiction communities (Robison, 2004).

The study

PAL III, developed by Softstar Shanghai Ltd. and launched in 2003 was the game chosen for textual analysis. In 2004 it was voted the most popular Chinese computer game by players, and it was familiar to the researchers. An analysis of PAL III as a multimodal text was carried out and a brief description of this is included below, not least to offer a context to what follows on fan production.
The PAL series has also been the subject of a great deal of fan production. Of the many online communities based on PAL, Pal union, established by several fans in 2001, is one of the most successful. By late 2005 Pal union had over 44,000 registered users, contributing input on 42,791 topics through 646,708 postings. An online survey by moderators of PAL union revealed that the majority of users are between 15 and 30 years old.

Generally Pal union is divided into six major sections: game techniques and tips, literature, multimedia artefacts, activities, socio-emotional communication and administration. In this study, attention has been paid to the two subsections containing PAL-related literature and PAL-related multimedia artefacts. The different kinds of artefacts posted within both sections can all be regarded as fan production, for they are created by players after their interaction with PAL. The most popular and valued postings within each section were located using a search facility built into the community website. These were then downloaded to a PC for analysis.

Ten potential participants for interview were identified from among those most actively contributing to the fanfiction site. A built-in facility within Pal union enabled instant messages to be sent to prospective participants, thus making it very easy to reach the potential sample. A brief message introduced the researcher, stated the research objectives and asked for their consent to be interviewed. 6 subjects responded and interviews were arranged for July 2005.

The individual interviews, lasting 60 to 90 minutes, were conducted using synchronous chat facilities: MSN or QQ, a Chinese language equivalent. A sense of trust between researcher and interviewees was important from the outset since the questions asked sought to dig deep into their gaming and “writing” experiences. The format was thus conversational and open-ended adhering to norms of the medium.

IRC texts were saved in Word for later analysis. Follow-up questions were posed and answered through e-mails. All the interviewees were highly computer literate and were comfortable being interviewed through Internet-mediated communication. From time to time they used electronic paralanguage (like :) for :) and the various emotional faces built into MSN and QQ to convey their feelings and opinions and to make the relationship between correspondents more personal.

PAL III as a multimodal text

PAL III belongs to a genre of a role-playing game (RPG) called Wuxia RPG, greatly influenced by Japanese RPGs but with its own special Chinese cultural features related to Wuxia literature. There is a strong narrative with a non-linear multiple-ending format, the precise ending reached being determined by the different choices players make as they play. As with all Wuxia stories PAL III is set in ancient China. The general plot of Wuxia stories involves knights-errant who pursue adventures driven by ambition, revenge or
devotion to justice, and suffer extreme hardship in the process (Bordwell, 2000). In *PAL III* the main task is for Jingtian, the hero, to neutralise evil-doers in order to save the human world. This is a classic tale of heroes, heroines, good and evil, battles, love and romance. The player has to make decisions about the options available to Jingtian so could be seen as playing this character. His relationships with other in-game characters, particularly the heroine Xuejian, are central to the game and they are affected by the choices the player makes.

While the game has its traditional narrative elements (protagonists, story, dialogues, cut-scenes etc) these are realised through language, images, poetry, music, sound and so on. Thus *PAL III* is a multimodal text: nevertheless written language remains important since tasks are presented to the player mainly through dialogues. The different choices players make when completing the dialogues are one of the main factors affecting the ending for the game. In the following example the player, as Jingtian, is offered three possible responses to Xuejian:

**Jingtian:** Then let me take you home. O.K.?

**Xuejian:** No, no. I don’t want to go back. I’ve learnt of their conspiracy and my grandfather is seriously ill now. They will no longer let me live my peaceful life.

**Jingtian:** 1) Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.
2) Really? Is it that bad?
3) What kind of conspiracy are they actually planning?

If a player picks the first option, 5 points will be added to Xuejian’s level of favour towards Jingtian, no points for the second or 3 points for the third. The ending of the game is determined by the female characters’ overall level of favour towards Jingtian. Therefore it might be said that the ending is partly decided by the players’ attitudes towards female characters in the game, and the choices of response they make for Jingtian.

Poetry is an important language element in *PAL III*, most of which is in the form of Ci (pronounced “tsih”), a type of lyric Chinese poetry. Graphics also play an important role in *PAL III*. Music in *PAL III* is used together with other semiotic forms to convey messages and emotion. Music is in turn melodiuous, gentle and sweet, or bold and unrestrained, reflecting the themes of the game – love, lust and freedom. A stirring piece of music will be used when a strong hero is fighting with little resistance. If the fight is arduous and highly risky, the music will be quite scary with a strong rhythm.

**Multimodal Fan Production**

Fan production on PAL union mirrors the range of modalities found within the game. In the *PAL*-related literature section of PAL union, the form of fan production is mainly language-based. It includes poetry, short articles and commentaries, fan-fictions and so on.
The above screen shot contains a piece of Ci poetry that a participant has created as one of the endings of PAL III. In this Ci the writer expresses his feelings towards a particular character named Zixuan. Zixuan's loneliness as well as her helplessness to give up Changqing's love are expressed through beautiful lines. One reader has commented, "While I read this poem the scene of this ending reappears in front of me. It makes me feel so sad again."

Fig. 1

Fig. 2
In the above short article, the writer compares the different protagonists from *PAL I* to *PAL III*. She argues that changes in balance between male and female protagonists, i.e. from one male protagonist with three female protagonists in *PAL I* to three male protagonists with four female protagonists in *PAL III* reflects changes in real society. Although a male principal is quite common in traditional Wuxia literature, she argues that modern Chinese people are less willing to accept a scenario where many females gather around one male character. The relationship pattern existing in *PAL III* is thus more equal. The writer of this short article has also made a comparison of the personalities of the protagonists as well as the story plots.

The PAL-related multimedia artefacts section contains drawings, music, flash animations and even games. The drawings here are either hand-painted and scanned or created using software like Photoshop. A participant usually chooses a particular character in PAL he/she likes most as a basis for a creation. Drawings of the same character created by different participants vary, partly because the participants’ skill in image making varies. But sometimes the difference reveals participants’ special feelings towards the character and offers a unique interpretation. Moreover, some drawings are made through collaborative efforts. Take the following two pictures for example. The left one was created by a participant who is good at drawing. Another participant skilled with Photoshop has added colour and background to it, making it more attractive and vivid than the original.
The music is one of the major factors contributing to the success of the *PAL* game series. A discussion dedicated to *PAL*-related music, was initiated in October 2004. In late 2005, 26 different pieces of music had been posted and more than 300 responses offered. Collaboration among participants plays an important role in music composition. For example, one participant may write lyrics for a particular character or scene. Working from these lyrics, another participant creates a melody. Sometimes tips are offered to those who might try performing these songs. Different versions sung by different participants are recorded and made available online. As one participant writes, “The purpose is not to show off her singing technique but to express her feelings through this song and share it with all the fans of *PAL* and music.”

Flash and videos are multimedia artefacts containing words, graphics and music. Participants might simply take material such as screen shots and music from the game and then combine them. Of course they may also take pains to draw their own pictures and create their own music, however most of the productions on Pal union belong to the first type. There is a 4-minute video in which the participants combine the most moving scenes from *PAL I* to *PAL III* with the theme music of *PAL III*.

Undoubtedly, making a *PAL*-related game is the most difficult task for the majority of fans but some do exist. The most popular game was created by a fan named “holiday”. Most of the characters, graphics and music are taken from the previous *PAL* games. Since the game was published, many fans have offered suggestions, comments and criticism after playing this game. Holiday has responded to this advice and made improvements to the game.

**Designing PAL III Fanfiction**

Fanfiction occupies a large proportion of all kinds of the fan production in the *PAL*-related literature section. Many fans of the *PAL* game series are also huge fans of *Wuxia* literature. Thus, the majority of fanfictions within Pal union can be regarded as contemporary *Wuxia* fictions.

The fictions are based either on one or a combination of games in the series. Some of the fictions are largely associated with the original story lines of *PAL* games while others are very imaginative and creative with new characters, storylines or settings. The extent to which an author relies on the *PAL* game or introduces new ideas is often decided by negotiation among participants within Pal union. Generally speaking, in order to be counted as *PAL*-related, a fiction should contain at least several characters from the *PAL* series and the personality of these characters should be similar to that of the originals. Thus this community is quite conservative, unlike those found on Cardcaptor.com, where all kinds of extensions and changes are tolerated, even encouraged. For example there is a whole genre where the sexual orientation of key characters is changed to create stories about
same sex couples, or characters from entirely different genres are brought together (Black, 2006).

The most successful writers within Pal union not only have to be familiar with PAL games but are also required to have a good knowledge of Wuxia literature, and the quality and richness of language associated with Wuxia are valued by fan readers. Within Pal union the resultant fan fiction becomes a new meaning-making resource, which invokes participants’ discussions around it.

Massive Audience and Peer Reviews
A Wuxia story can consist of more than 10 thousand words, so the writing process is very time-consuming and protracted. The author might easily lose motivation without an audience or material goal. Thus many authors within Pal union choose to post chapters one by one to get encouragement and feedback from the readers of their fiction.

For example, one author set himself a goal to write a chapter a week for a year. This fiction received a lot of attention immediately after the author posted his first chapter. Generally speaking the author stuck to his writing schedule quite well and published his chapters as planned. Many readers made efforts to give constructive advice, pointing out mistakes such as an inaccurate description of a form of martial art, illogical development between chapters and scenes deemed too unrealistic. In some cases the author simply explained his decisions, but he also took note of a lot of the advice and modified his fiction accordingly. The whole atmosphere of meaning negotiation and process-making was friendly. A typical post said, “I have said a lot today. I don’t think XXX would mind anyway. It is a really good fiction, otherwise I wouldn’t read it so carefully. The more I like it, the better I want it to be.” Purely hostile and negative reviews are seldom seen as they are strongly discouraged within the community. Robison (2004) also found an emphasis on constructive criticism and collaboration between writers and audience. Purely hostile and negative feedback is strongly discouraged within the Cardcaptor.com community.

Although peer reviews do not have such an obvious effect on other forms of fan production as they do on ongoing fan fictions, participants within Pal union are still happy to give their opinions on others’ works. In this way participants are motivated to create more work, and their productive skills are likely to be improved.

Interview Findings
Six fans from different cities around China were interviewed, three male and three female, ranging in age from 17–20-years-old. Four of them were students in high schools, the other two were college students. All of them are fans of the PAL game series. They also have other hobbies like reading and writing, drawing, cartoon-making, listening to music.
and so on. Their different hobbies have contributed to their fan production of various forms within Pal union. The authors acknowledge that such a small sample of interviews cannot be used to generalise any conclusions about the activity of the whole community, they do however document an interesting and as yet under-research set of emerging social and creative practices within gaming culture. Given the size of the sample, any meaningful conclusions related to age or gender are impossible and we do not attempt to offer an analysis based on these as significant variables in this study. This is not to imply however that in a broader study these would not be important.

All of the interviewees started playing PAL when they were in primary or early secondary school. Most of them were introduced to the game by other people such as cousins, classmates and friends, even a parent. For some interviewees this was the first computer game they played and they found it hard. Strategies for learning to play generally have a collaborative element. Moreover, with the development of the Internet various kinds of information and resources are now available for them when they get stuck.

As far as PAL II is concerned, I can easily get the solution from the Internet if I have any problem. Whenever I raise questions within Pal union, there are always people there glad to help me.

Interestingly, all the interviewees had played a game more than once. To conquer all the enemies and reach the final stage is not the only purpose and motivation for their interactions with the game.

I’ve played it at least three times. To be frank, the first time I played it I just wanted to see the ending. However, when I saw the ending it was so sad and moving I immediately decided to play it again. I wanted to experience all the details I had ignored. Actually I did get a better understanding about the story after I played it for the second time.

“I don’t know exactly why I play it again and again. I just want to revive the moving scenes (like eat together and get old together). I think it’s just like a good novel and movie. You just can’t read it once and forget it.”

Perceptions of Pal union

The majority of the interviewees mentioned the positive effects the massive audience within Pal union and their encouragement and constructive comments have on their fan production. For some interviewees Pal union has already become an important part of their life where they have made good friends.

Oh, tell you a secret. I actually met my boyfriend through Pal union too. He also loves drawing and is quite good at it. However, he has gone to the United States. We couldn’t communicate as often as we used to due to the time difference. Thanks to Pal union, we still have a common space there.
Unfortunately this September I will enter my final year of high school. The study will be really tough. I don’t think I would have so much spare time as before. But I have promised that I will come back soon after the entrance examination to the university. I have unforgettable memories of good friends here.

Discussion

Is PAL just a game?

It is clear from the analysis of the game, and the impact it has on fans, that this game is an engaging text with characters and plot that inspire affection and admiration in fans. Their reactions challenge the view that in computer games fantasy, challenge and curiosity are the three major ways to motivate players (Malone, 1981). It is true that when players try PAL for the first time these three elements are important. However, the characters, the moving scenes and story are the motives for players to run PAL repeatedly. In this sense, it could be argued that in the eyes of the players PAL is an attractive text similar to a good novel or film. The difference is that the story in PAL only unfolds as the player takes action; a sense of “agency” remains. Complex feelings are evoked when a player knows that his/her next action will cause the death of his/her favourite character within the game. It seems that the success of the PAL series is largely due to the strong characterisation and compelling story full of emotion. This sentimental perspective is clearly valued by the fans, and may partially explain why PAL attracts so many female players.

Although substantial investment has been made in the visual design of computer games (Smith, 2001), results here suggest the design of good characters and good story plot is worth equal, if not more, attention. An RPG game with terrific graphic effects may motivate players to devote a lot of their time and energy in order to reach the final stage. But only an RPG game with good graphics plus successful characterisation, a deliberate story plot and an appreciable theme is attractive enough to replay and is able to “nourish the soul”.

In what ways do PAL and Pal union promote literacy practices?

Firstly, PAL as a meaningful multimodal text could be regarded as a stimulus, which inspires a range of multimodal literacy practices. After their interaction with the text many fans want to “write” their own interpretation of the text and express their emotions in one way or another. Strong characterisation, and memorable story development lead to strong allegiance to particular characters and story elements which are then interpreted by fans through their own productions. Other literary aspects related to traditional Chinese culture like poems and Wuxia elements also provoke the creation of similar forms of fiction by players. None of the outputs of literacy practices are divorced from the text, PAL, but are stimulated by it and are created within the game context. Such values as the importance of love and affection are treasured in the original PAL text as well as in the fan production, particularly in the fan fiction.
However, the game as stimulus is not enough to explain the volume of literacy practices surrounding PAL. To engage in literacy practices, players also need a common space where they can present and share work. Audience approval and critique make the creative process more meaningful and rewarding for these fans. The role of the Internet is key here in that it makes possible the creation of a space beyond temporal and geographical restrictions where players who have common interest and skills can easily interact with each other no matter where they are. Pal union is exactly one of these virtual public platforms for fans of PAL with common interests and expertise in different areas to enact various kinds of literacy practices.

The constructive and collaborative environment created within Pal union helps participants to improve their literacy skills. Pal union plays a particularly important role in the creation of ongoing fan fictions where constructive comments and feedback play a crucial role throughout the writing process as the author is motivated to improve and develop the fiction.

Last but not the least, in the whole play and production process a player of PAL actually takes on various kinds of identities. While the player is playing the game, he/she is both a player and a reader of the text. The gaming experience here is much like a meaning-making process, during which a personal interpretation of the game is gradually formed. Then in order to put his/her own interpretation into practice, the reader becomes a “writer” or a creator. The output of the literacy practice is the fan production. To show his/her creative works, the “writer” becomes a participant within Pal union. However, the concept of participant here covers various kinds of identity. When he/she uploads his/her creative work onto Pal union, he/she is a creator; when he/she views other participants’ works, he/she becomes the audience; when he/she comments on the work, he/she turns out to be a reviewer; and when he/she shows expertise in a particular area and frequently gives constructive comments on others’ works, he/she could be regarded as an “informal tutor” within Pal union.

**Implications for formal schooling**

Findings from this research reveal that games such as PAL are more than just a game and players’ gaming experience is far from trivial. For players such fantasy games are meaningful texts which inspire various kinds of literacy practices. Associated public platforms available on the Internet give players an opportunity to share their creative works. Through interaction with other fans, authors are motivated and relevant literacy skills are gradually improved.

At a time when many educators and researchers are bemoaning the decline in students’ school-based literacy skills, this study investigating a non-school, informal online community based on a game series has actually found students are really “doing literacy” actively and enthusiastically. Moreover, there is evidence that participants are improving
their literacy skills in a range of media through their interaction with other participants. However, until now these kinds of literacy practices have been unsanctioned. Games have not yet been accepted as suitable texts for literacy practices in formal education although they have become a very important part of young people's lives. Furthermore language-based literacy practice still has a dominant place in schools while other forms are normally viewed as secondary.

Perhaps it is time for educators and researchers to pay serious attention to how the literacy practices occurring in these informal learning environments fuel students with continuous motivation and contribute positively to literacy development. In schools more efforts could be made to enable students to write about their personal experiences. Computer games might be used as topics to stimulate literacy practices. Students could also be given more freedom to choose the form of literary practice they prefer. This is not to suggest that any computer game provides an antidote to the decline of school-based literacy skills. A lot of practical issues such as gender differences need to be considered when attempting to bring computer games into formal educational context. Since games can stimulate various kinds of literacy practices on the part of both male and female students in the informal setting, it may be worth bringing computer games like PAL into schools, to be studied as a text with “writing” tasks based on it. Unfortunately the strong emphasis on test scores in current education, which privileges print based literacy, in China, the UK, US and beyond, is likely to be a major obstacle to the adoption of such practice.

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