AFTERWARD TO DESIGN LITERACIES: LEARNING FROM DIGITAL ENVIRONEMENTS

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Humans are creatures of language. Our very ability to form cultures and societies is due to language. And yet cultures and societies have always seen language as potentially dangerous to the very social order it helps create. Before literacy, societies almost always restricted who could speak publically and officially. Often it was priests, leaders, and elders who spoke and others who listened. In many societies it was, and still is today, fine for people to speak and listen where and when they want so long as what they talk about is "mundane". But they dare not speak or listen to treason or heresy as these are defined by the powers that be.

With the advent of literacy, new problems of control arose. Silent reading is more dangerous than speech, because it is harder to "overhear" and police the treason or heresy of the silent interpreter. Writing is the most dangerous form of language of all because it can spread so far and wide and its author can hide behind a fictitious identity.

Premodern societies often used violence to restrict language. Even modern societies, well into the 19th century—societies like England and the United States—debated whether poor people should be taught to read (certainly not write) for fear that reading would lead to interpretations

that questioned religion and the status quo. Eventually, however, modern societies learned that there was a lot less to fear from literacy than had been thought. Modern formal schooling served to teach the vast majority of people to accept as "received wisdom" what elites produced in writing and in the mainstream media. Let us call this the "schooling effect".

The schooling effect relies on instilling in people a particular theory of language. This theory says that when we speak or write we are "following rules". Furthermore, language represents—re-presents—reality by packaging into words "ideas" that reflect the world. These words can then be transmitted to others who unpack them to get at the ideas and, thus, in turn, the world as it is. Finally, the story goes, there are people who "know the rules" better than others and see the world more clearly than others, thanks to birth or education. These are the people who do—or should—produce writing. Reading what they write—or watching what they produce on mainstream media—is the role of most people in society. This theory of language is now so common and long running in our schooled societies that we take it almost entirely for granted as obvious—or did until quite recently (so-called "primitive societies" often viewed language not as transmission but as performance).

Today, modern popular culture and the uses it makes of digital media can teach even quite young people a truth about language that schools have long hidden. Take video games as an example. When you start to play video games you treat them rather like reading and writing. Some professional designer "wrote" the game and you read it. But then you start to fail and you begin to ask yourself how the "rules of the game"—the ones the designer "wrote"—can be used to your advantage to solve problems your way and allow you to win. You see that the game as a

designed object and see, too, that you can and should “deconstruct” its design so that you can understand it and use it for your own goals and purposes.

Then you can go one step further. You put in a “cheat” (a piece of code that changes how the game works) and make the game operate the way you want it to. As you put in the cheat and play the game, you realize that you just designed a part of the game yourself. You begin to see yourself as a co-designer with the game’s designer. But then you realize that even playing without the cheat was a form of co-design, since you were already using the game’s rules for your purposes, making them work for you.

The final step is that game companies (as they often do today) give players the software by which the game was made and let the play “mod” the game, that is, modify it in small or very large ways. Enough modding and the game looks less like it was designed by the “elite” game designer and more like the “official” designer is just along for the ride as a “co-designer”.

The “logic” of gaming leads gamers to see games as designed; to see design as an invitation for modification and re-design; and to see designing as really collaborative co-design. Game designers who stay in business have long caught on to all this. In this sense, Will Wright’s *Spore* is indicative of the future of gaming. *Spore* was designed by Wright’s team of professional designers, but is made in such a way that players can design the creatures and worlds they play in. The best of what they design is circulated to other players and eventually the creatures and worlds originally made by the game’s designers play less and less a role in the game and the creatures and worlds designed by the players themselves play the predominate role. The game is

truly co-designed by the "official" designers and the players as a community. Indeed, the day will come when the "official" designers' creatures and worlds will have disappeared, replaced by better ones made by the players as they design for themselves and redesign what other players have made.

So this is one thing young people can learn from video games. They can learn a similar message from other digital media. But this IS and always has been the logic of human language, as well. It has taken games and other digital media for us to rediscover this deep human truth. Speakers and writers do not just "follow rules". They use the rules of grammar to design their own meanings for their own purposes. Just like gamers, they seek to figure out how the rules can be used for their own goals. Grammar sets but the parameters for this design work. And, as Bakhtin said, a great deal of what we as speakers and writers say is co-designed with other speakers and writers as we "mod" (modify) their previously uttered or written words.

Meaning making is a matter of design and collaborative co-design. All speakers and writers—not just elites—are productive, creative, co-designers of language. Furthermore—just as with games—the more we come to a conscious and explicit recognition of the "rules of the game" (grammar and ways with words, in this case) the more we can understand and intervene in our social, cultural, and political contexts as savvy designers.

As people today catch on that digital media and language are tools for design and co-design, they have broken a good deal of the traditional policing of language, of who can speak, write, create, and produce and who cannot. As production proliferates through ever more complex and global

networks and communities, it is harder and harder to restrict and police. The elites are left to whine that what "everyday" people produce isn't "professional" even as what "everyday" people produce often replaces what professionals produce (as in *Spore)*.

But there is a problem. The realization that both language and digital media are tools for design and co-design of particular perspectives and purposes means that meaning making is always about "spin". It is always about a perspective on the world, not a transparent window onto the world and truth. Just as game engines are for building worlds of certain types, not one universal world, we design different views of the world through language, not a universal transcendent neutral a-cultural viewpoint. So, then, it is easy to lapse into a sort of postmodern relativism that, in fact, detracts from our sense of agency as designers: we can begin to think that everything is just one perspective among many relative to the designer's values and beliefs. Any perspective is as good as any other, we will say. We will ask: Who is to judge other cultures and communities?

But, reality bites back and real people get really hurt when some perspectives are enacted and not others. Not all video games are as good as each other. So, too, with perspectives. We have to make choices and we have to make the criteria of our choices clear. A view of meaning making (whether with digital media or language) as collaborative co-design requires, in the end, thoughtful debates about what is "right" and 'true" in the sense of what makes for a better, more humane, more sustainable world. We want to make good games and good worlds. So Mary Sheridan-Rabideau and Jennifer Rowsell's *Design Literacies: Learning from Digital*

Environments has given us exciting insights about new media in the modern world while also allowing us to rediscover a very old truth about language.