Beyond books: Electronic entertainments as supplements, not substitutes, to literacy

By Karen Orr Vered

It is increasingly acceptable to claim that recreational media use is taking up time that children could be devoting to more worthwhile pursuits such as reading and healthy physical activity. These claims are so commonplace that we hear them on the radio and read about them in newspapers. Even newsletters issued by health insurance companies capitalise on the rhetoric. Claiming that media use is displacing or replacing other activities is to proffer a substitution thesis: media use and media play are substitutes for other activities. This essay raises several concerns about the substitution thesis and its usefulness as a base for scholarly research on children’s use of media and its consequences for literacy. The essay deconstructs the substitution thesis to broaden our view of literacy so that we can more readily recognise how print literacy and media literacy are two parts of a much larger social practice of literacy.

In arguing that children’s media use is significant to their literacy development and practices, literacy is understood here in a cultural and practical sense that challenges more traditional and limited notions of literacy. Literacy here is defined as cultural and social practices that are not bound in books but, rather, are experienced beyond books.

What is a substitution thesis?

Asserting that media use displaces and replaces other, more worthy activities is to say that media use takes up the time and space that would otherwise be given to a different set of activities. For example, we may hear that on average, Australian children spend half an hour a day playing video games. One wonders what children did with that half-hour before video games became standardised in the suite of household electronics. One might ask what activities have been displaced or moved aside to make time for video games. With respect to replacement, the argument suggests that not only have media marginalised other activities but that they have eliminated, or replaced, those activities. A logical question, then, is what activities have been eliminated.

Most recently, public curiosity has been piqued about the ways in which media use and media play may take time away from exercise and reading, two activities that are highly valued in developmental paradigms of childhood studies. The good and healthy endeavours of reading and physical play are thus pitted against the perceived useless entertainment provided by electronic media. Reading and physical play are understood to engender long-term benefits for children’s development while electronic entertainments are considered to be activities without productive consequences or outcomes. Mirroring a long tradition of fears about the potential harmfulness of film and television, some consider play with electronic media to be a trivial form of entertainment and sometimes even dangerous.

A substitution thesis thus pre-empts any objective consideration of the possible merits of electronic entertainment and media play because it begins with the assumption that something highly valued is lost and, furthermore, been replaced by something that is trivial or even harmful. When the research thesis dismisses the object of study through prejudgment, deeper and more complex understanding of the subject is foreclosed. In this way, the substitution thesis does not leave research open to identifying any benefits of media use and media play. If we care to know how children interpret their engagement with media properties and integrate these experiences with practices such as print literacy and physical activity, generalising all children’s media use as non-productive is counter-productive. The study of children’s media use, like any other object of scholarly inquiry, must be approached with the objectivity that will allow us to recognise benefits, should we encounter them through careful research. Moreover, the generic nature of a substitution thesis masks the substantial concerns we may have about particular media activities and

Karen Orr Vered is a senior lecturer in screen studies at Flinders University. Her research interests include three areas of media studies and their points of convergence: children’s media use, television studies and interactive media.

Several of her essays are published in anthologies and in the journals Convergence, Continuum, Visual Anthropology Review and The Velvet Light Trap. She is a member of the Media Studies Subject Advisory Committee for the Senior Secondary Assessment Board of South Australia and is also a member of the Digital Media Committee of the South Australian Film Corporation.
specific content. It does not allow us to discern among media or media practices. A substitution thesis does not allow us to see how media literacy might be related to print literacy as part of a larger social practice.

**What do we know about children and media?**

Studies in the United States, Europe and Australia have shown that children’s use of computers and other electronic media quite often involves using more than one medium simultaneously (Durkin & Aisbett 1999; Livingstone & Bober 2003; Livingstone & Bober 2004; Livingstone & Boell 2001; Hutchby & Moran-Ellis 2001; Meredyth et al. 1999; Kaiser Family Foundation 1999). Children listen to music and surf the net at the same time. They watch television and read at the same time. It appears from these large national and international studies that new media are not displacing or replacing other media but that they are being integrated with more traditional forms of media such as magazines, books and even the old electronic medium, television. These findings are particularly important for television studies because it confirms a view long held by scholars of television: TV is consumed in a distracted rather than attentive fashion (Feuer 1983; Morse 1990). Adults and children regularly have the TV switched on while doing other things including reading. Our attention to TV is not characterised by an intent gaze but, rather, a mobile, furtive and distracted glance. But why then, have the substitution and displacement theses captured the popular imagination so forcefully?

It is inarguable that the day has only 24 hours and playing a new video game does take some time, especially if you want to play well and pass through several levels or explore a lot of the game terrain and story world. But it seems our concern over possible substitutions is far greater than evidence would merit. The substitution thesis is more insidious. Underlying the simple statement that electronic media now engage us more than in the past is the implication that this engagement is inherently bad. The logical conclusion of the extended argument is that interest in electronic media is somehow detrimental to individual development and to social welfare. With respect to the importance we place on the leisure activities we pursue, the substitution thesis implies that we value reading and physical activity more highly than we value other forms of leisure activity. We seem to be hearing more and more about electronic media but what we hear is usually negative, whether the characterisation is supported by evidence or not.

Although we often hear and read that television and other media cause social problems (most recently with calls in the US for censorship after the Columbine, Colorado, student massacre) or handicap individual cognitive development (the claim that video games and TV affect the ability of a child to pay attention to school lessons), the evidence for such sweeping claims is weak. For every study that asserts direct social consequences arise from media use, there is another study that disproves it. With respect to cognitive development, among the few studies of interactive games that have shown positive effects are those that indicate improved cognitive skills. Even more convincing, many of the studies that have claimed negative consequences of media use have been criticised for their research design or underlying ideological slant.

In her thorough examination of the history of research on children and television, Carmen Luke (1990, p. 31) argues that in the early years of research (1917–1953), the disciplines of sociology, psychology and education primarily viewed media as a social information source for children. That is, movies and television were understood to be information sources from which children were socialised or learned social lessons. At the same time, the disciplines of psychology, sociology and education all viewed the child and development as measurable.

Luke identifies two fundamental problems with these approaches. Firstly, the examination of children as television viewers was mainly conducted in schools because ‘access to children was limited to their only public location’, while many propositions of the research, the ‘scientific knowledges imposed on TV-viewer relationships’, were situated in the domestic context, the family home (p. 15). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, Luke says that the ‘impact’ of TV was said to be located in the mind of the child as argued in cognivist theories, but this impact was measured in and as behaviour registered in the body (p. 17). That is, the signs of cognitive development were evidenced through outward activity or bodily behaviour. In a review of more recent literature with respect to video and computer games, psychologist Kevin Durkin (1995) has shown how several research approaches have failed to prove a reliable connection between viewing violence and enacting aggression. He has pointed out the limitations of findings from case studies, experimental studies and correlational studies. Even though negative effects or potential harm have not been proven, the stain remains. Television, film and now new media are considered less useful and less productive than other recreational pursuits for children.

The concerns over video and computer games are virtually the same as those raised for film and television in previous eras. Once again, the research has not been able to prove that there are any negative effects associated with video or computer game play. Studies have, however, shown minor increases in cognitive skills, spatial-relational skills and motor skills through use of video and computer games. In Durkin’s 1995 review, he examined the research on several key issues related to young people and computer (video) games including: the possibility of addiction to games, the impact of game playing on family life and school performance, health effects, aggression, and relation to social involvement. This review of literature later informed a second publication for the Office of Film and Literature Classification, *Computer Games and Australians Today* (Durkin & Aisbett 1999). In the latter study, the authors make clear that although ‘[a] body of work is accumulating which indicates that early fears of pervasively negative effects are not supported’ and ‘several well-designed studies conducted by proponents of the theory that computer games would promote aggression in the young have found no such effects. In contrast, other studies focused on cognitive and spatial benefits have yielded positive results’ (p. XI).

Since the evidence has yet to convince some, a better direction for research and argument is to direct our efforts at capturing the appeal that electronic media hold for children, so that we can mobilise it in our efforts to develop those practices, skills,
and values that we do respect whether it be for physical well-being, print literacy or character development. The things that we find so valuable in reading, we can also find in some of our electronic arts and entertainments. Movies, electronic games, television and other entertainment arts can be a source of rich narrative pleasure. Rather than nostalgically bemoaning a lost era in which we imagine that children spent many hours engaged in the lofty pursuits of literary appreciation and criticism, we might aim to discover and embrace the qualities of electronic media that appeal to children to examine for their potential and benefits.

Displacement, replacement and post-industrial leisure

Another concern with the substitution thesis is the assumption of displacement and/or replacement. If media use is displacing and replacing other activities, we have to ask which activities. If we were to take a long view of the history of childhood, we would note that in the past, many hours of a child's day were filled with labour, both waged and unpaid. The industrial revolution transformed labour, removed children from the labour force and gave birth to the concepts of leisure and leisure time. Historically for children, leisure and regular schooling replaced work. At present, the nature of our leisure time and the entertainment options available to us are increasingly structured by the movements of late capitalism. The way we spend our leisure time, the activities and objects that consume us in leisure, are increasingly the products of popular, mass culture and media are now integral, even essential, to mass culture. The industries associated with the production and distribution of electronic entertainments and film are significant to many economies, including Australia's. Debate over the recent free trade agreement with the US made this very clear to the Australian public. Electronic media are important to the entertainment and information systems that adults and children use on a daily basis. The technologies that support the serious and silly are similar. Education and entertainment increasingly share more in common and some of the boundaries are blurring (Keenway & Bullen 2001). The story of Harry Potter provides us with a useful example.

Book sales for Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone (Rowling 1997) soared after the release of the film in 2001. More importantly, this occurred four years after the book was first published. The film release revitalised book sales. Seeing the film can drive consumers to the book, in the same way that a popular book made into a movie drives box office sales. At the time of the film's release, sales for Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone surged with the greatest intensity on record and more than a million copies were sold in 12 months. Some of these book sales are anticipatory of the film while others are retrospective of the film. That is to say, some people bought the book because the movie was coming and they wanted to prepare for the film by becoming familiar with the original work. These are anticipatory sales, in that they anticipate the film release. Other readers bought the book after having seen the movie. We can speculate that they enjoyed the film so much that they wanted more Harry Potter pleasure in the characters and stories. For both anticipatory and retrospective purchases of the book, the links between book sales and movie tickets are important. The links are the kernel of literacy and yet not exclusive to reading.

The relationship between movie tickets and book sales is not an isolated phenomenon specific to the Harry Potter property. According to the American newspaper, USA Today:

'Nothing sells books more than a movie. Nineteen of the decade's best sellers were movie tie-ins. Laura Hillenbrand's Seabiscuit, number 36 for the decade, was a hit before the movie and the movie fostered even more sales. The most successful books enjoy four incarnations: hardcover, paperback, movie and video/DVD. In fact, Pat Schroeder, the former congresswoman and president of the Association of American Publishers since 1997, says, "We need to find a way to get books into movie theatres so they can sell them along with the popcorn." (http://www.usatoday.com/life/books/news/2004-03-10-bookslist-decade-main_x.htm)

If we define literacy as a cultural and social practice, we can rethink the substitution thesis and begin to understand that media use and media play are integrated within broader cultural practices and systems of representation and significance, not unlike the way the film and book mutually support the stories of Harry Potter. If we understand literacy as a set of cultural practices, we can also include interactive game play among these practices. Rather than substituting for print literacy, media use complements print literacy because the two are related in the broader sense of literacy.

If movies benefit the publishing industry, we might also ask how they can benefit children. How do we capitalise on the appeal that media hold for children and mobilise it in literacy? The first step is to take a broad view of literacy. Literacy is not simply the ability to read and write. It is a social orientation and a social practice. Literacy is historically and culturally embedded. It might be useful to think of literacy as a continuum from generic to esoteric. Some literacies are open to general access while others, such as medical knowledge, are more esoteric and require a vast amount of special study to access. Thought about in this way, one might expect media literacy to be among the generic. Media objects are available to the general public; the concern over their power suggests that they are also accessed by a broad share of the public. For many forms of media there are few constraints to access in a wealthy and open society like Australia. Much popular electronic entertainment is, like the movie version of Harry Potter, based on literature or on the tropes we know well from literature. The characteristics that make movies and video games like other forms of art and literature make them accessible.

When we are able to recognise the genres of video games or the structural design of websites, we are demonstrating the higher order skills of literacy, the set of social and cognitive practices that can be undertaken for a range of texts and media. While we may want children to read more books for the love of reading, unless we are members of the pleasure police, we cannot dictate which activities they will choose for pleasure in their leisure.

Reading literature provides a range of pleasures but so too do electronic entertainments. This seems to be the rub of the substitution thesis. While time spent on reading sometimes continued next page
may be replaced by time spent with other media, it does not necessarily follow that literacy is displaced. If we want to capitalise on the pleasures that electronic entertainments offer for the enhancement of literacy, we must take a positive approach to media entertainments. Instead of dismissing what appeals to young people, we need to find out what they like about it and use that insight to help them extend the higher-order thinking that we value in literacy.

**Media specificity**

Another problem with the substitution thesis is that it often lumps together all media in opposition to some other individual activity. For the purposes of this article, the individual activity in question is reading. In treating all media as similarly different to the one activity in question, substitution theses often overlook the unique characteristics of each medium, or their media specificity. For instance, a considerable amount of computer use is highly dependent upon reading. When a child goes to the website for the Australian Football League team, Port Adelaide Power, to look up a favourite player or the team’s record, reading skills are essential to the most basic search. More importantly, every time a child visits a website, web literacy is engaged. One of the big appeals of the Port Power website in 2004 was listening to the team song. Children were logging on to the site to listen to the club song. The music was an attractor, the reason for visiting the site, and yet, once there, many would have done a bit of reading. In many ways, electronic entertainment facilitates reading by drawing potential readers in with a hook from a different medium – in the case of Port Power’s website, it was music. The visitor’s engagement with the website is supported by a range of media, music, video, text and still images while it is all situated in the cultural context of local sport fandom.

Similarly, video and computer game play requires reading with some genres asking more reading of the player than others. Games in the adventure quest genre usually have rich back stories that are presented in the brochure included in the game packaging. They also have associated websites that deliver similar background information about the story’s world, characters and future fiction (a sort of foreshadowing of possible sequels). Active gamers often read online or print magazines dedicated to games, game play and gaming culture. Many reading and literacy activities can be structured around gaming culture. Children can read about and research characters and stories from video games through on- and offline resources.

Treated like other forms of literature, video and computer games can be the touchstone for a range of creative writing exercises for children of all ages. Writing additional adventures, back stories, scenarios or character descriptions, for instance, almost naturally draws upon the open-ended and expansive nature of games while at the same time offering exercise in the more traditional practices of language arts education. We can also take advantage of the media-specific qualities of these new entertainments and design literacy learning activities around structure, design and communities of practice in new media. We should engage children in the analysis of web design as we would engage them in analysis of stories and literature. While some activities focus on content and its development, others examine structure and design.

Beyond the narrative pleasure that we gain from literature, one of the important ends to developing a love of literature is to understand how stories are structured, what the components are and how they work together. The same is true of websites and computer games. Young people know a lot about these media forms. By encouraging them to not only play with them but also to articulate what it is they appreciate about them, we hope to move children toward a more sophisticated level of critical and analytical thought on these engaging forms. Leading theorist and advocate of learning technologies, Seymour Papert, has criticised the use of computers in Australian and American schools because they remain a tool for information retrieval rather than one for children’s creative activity (Conference address, Interaction Design and Children, 1 June 2004).

A simple activity that capitalises on the appeal of the web for children is to have them list their favourite websites. Once the lists are made, the individual sites can be grouped in categories. This can be repeated several times, aiming for different groupings with each iteration. This exercise stimulates thought about genre and generic features of websites. In one instance content may be the criterion for grouping while in others it may be format, audience, publisher or other distinctions. This simple exercise is a start toward using the web creatively as it makes clear some of the basic design considerations that structure a website.

In discussing video games and literacy learning, James Paul Gee, Professor of Reading in Curriculum and Instruction within the School of Education at University of Wisconsin, Madison, says that for ‘critical learning’ to take place, the learner must be able to consciously recognise, reflect, critique and manipulate the design grammar at a metalevel. The learner must recognise in the game, at an internal level, ‘a system of inter-related elements making up the possible content of the domain and externally as ways of thinking, acting, interacting, and valuing that constitute the identities of those people who are members of the affinity group associated with the domain’ (Gee 2003, p. 41). That is to say, the learner should be encouraged and guided to look at both the internal structures of a game or website and the community that affiliates around that content and its presentation. For instance, we might ask what does it mean to be a person who visits the Port Power website. What do we find on this site? How might we make use of it? A rich discussion ensuing from this exercise might address issues of geography, how sport articulates locality, and issues of fan practices, both around the site and internal to it.

While Gee’s focus is on video games and what they teach us about literacy learning, the insights he provides can be applied to other media as well. He asserts that ‘the sorts of active and critical learning about design and the type of problem-solving identity that [some games provide] may well relate to later learning in domains like science’, when science learning is understood as ‘an active process of inquiry and not the memorisation of passive facts’ (Gee 2003, p. 48).

One of the things that games do well is to require players to take on identity and character features. Gee suggests that an analogue for learning is to empower the learner to take on the identity of investigator and problem-solver. In teaching literacy skills, we often ask what might happen next. This question not only asks what is possible and what is plausible, it also asks,
given the form this story has taken, what does our knowledge of genre tell us. In analyses of websites, the analogous questions might be: what type of questions would people want answered at this website; what else might be interesting or useful to include on this website; where might it fit; how would we arrange this with the other content on the site; and how would the visitor find the information she is looking for. This type of investigation encourages children to become designers, the authors of websites, games and other media.

**Literacy unbound and out of the closet**

‘On the eve of the TV era, the educational discourse had attributed to children a new dimension. By the late 1940s, children and adolescents had been transformed into consumers of mass culture and mass media. For social critics, academics and the public, the problem with children’s access to and relationship with popular culture and mass media was their susceptibility to the messages of a cultural text directed at mass society, not necessarily or solely directed at children (Luke 1990, p. 57).

One of the responses to this view taken in Australia is reflected in our regulatory requirement for children’s programming on television. C programming, as it is known, is content specifically designed for consumption by children. Another approach to solving adult anxiety about children’s television consumption was suggested by researchers in the 1950s who recommended bringing television into classrooms (Luke 1990, p. 67). This did eventuate and became part of the media literacy movement in schools but it has not achieved its greatest goal. Instead of bringing popular media into classrooms, schools have been more inclined to use television and other media as audio-visual aids to instruction. Instead of studying popular media for what they are, teachers often use media texts as examples in lessons that are not about media. Media have not been brought into classrooms because students love media; they have been brought into classrooms so that they remain under adult auspices and control through the institution of schooling. If media literacy programs to date had been successful, we should feel much less anxiety about new media and how they will be integrated into our everyday lives.

One of the most important things that we can do to take advantage of the appeal of popular media is to legitimize it. We need to bring popular media into the classroom in a public and positive manner. Perhaps another way to think about this is to find the serious in the silly. Having seen a film and conducted research into its production, which can be done on the Web as a way to engage children in longer sessions of online reading, we can make the experience of media a public one by creating a display board about film. The board can include summaries of the movie plot, analyses of the story, comparisons with the book upon which it is based, criticism of the film, drawings of the characters, or drawings of how students envision characters in a way different to that depicted in the film. There are numerous ways to extend the creative and analytical reception of a film by taking it seriously and engaging with the material in ways that legitimise popular culture in the classroom. Some readers may respond to this suggestion by thinking, ‘this is what I do in my classroom’. To those readers, I say well done and I propose a further challenge: try doing this with a film that is not a social issue film or try using a half-hour situation comedy from overseas or a video game for a similar set of exercises.

Among the criticisms often waged against electronic entertainment is that they are somehow isolating and do not encourage social engagement. The best way to counter this claim is to share the experience. Public display legitimises media and makes them more accessible to critique. This is especially important for video and computer games because they are often the objects of such criticism. Adults often think that children’s media practices are private but, in fact, they are embedded in peer-group cultures from which adults are excluded. It is not that electronic media are private endeavours; they are simply not interesting to many adults. Once children have heard that adults think poorly of their interests, it is reasonable that they become more secretive about these interests. Acknowledging the expertise of young people and asking them to share their esoteric knowledge with adults is a way to make their media experiences more public and, perhaps, more palatable to adults.

Media use is not a substitute for literacy; it is a supplement to literacy. We need to recognise and make use of the opportunities that media present for expanding language arts learning and critical appreciation for emergent forms of art and entertainment. Stories, storytelling, culture building and belonging are keystones of literacy and we can find these things beyond books.

**References**

Durkin K 1995, *Computer Games and their Effects on Young People: A Review*, Office of Film and Literature Classification, Sydney, NSW.

Durkin K and Aisbett K 1999, *Computer Games and Australians Today*, Office of Film and Literature Classification, Sydney, NSW.


Meredith D et. al. 1999, *Real Time: Computers, Change and Schooling*, Australian Key Centre for Cultural and Media Policy, Brisbane.

