Post-Script
Competing Literacies and the Politics of Video Game Trailers

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Georgetown University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of the Arts
in Communication, Culture and Technology

By

Michael R. Moore, B.S.

Washington, D.C.
May 2008
Abstract

Video game trailers are simultaneously scrutinized and overlooked. Both game fans and the gaming industry invest huge amounts of time and money into video game trailers, yet few outside the community pay notice. Media critics, film critics, and game studies scholars have little to say about video game trailers.

This critical oversight has political consequences. To paraphrase Langdon Winner, our understanding of new media and new technology affects our lived experience of that media and technology. And as modern technology continues to outpace itself, society struggles to navigate an ever larger pool of new cultural forms.

Looking specifically at video game trailers, I argue that audiences approach new media through both formal history and social literacy. Using Lisa Kernan’s work on film trailers as a guide, I trace a history of the trailer from pre-cinematic appeals, to motion picture previews, and finally to video game trailers. Comparing film trailers to game trailers, I argue that game trailers often offer audiences greater interpretive flexibility. Following Gee’s work on video games and semiotic domains, I argue that audiences read game trailers through particular affinity groups. Moreover, as Gee emphasizes, these readings are inherently political. Building on Jenkins’ work with fan communities, I look at the political implications of competing literacies. I argue that fan-made trailers and other means of digital representation offer an alternative to mainstream political representation; this new literacy is a playful demonstration of cultural and technical mastery that is situated and local, yet well aware of global voices.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction 1

2. The Literature on Literacy 18

3. The Following ARGUMENT has been Approved for RESTRICTED AUDIENCES ONLY 32

4. When Literacies Compete: Reading, Writing and a Video Game Trailer 59

5. Digital Representation and the Polis: From Literate to Ludic 86

6. Post-Script / Post-Literacy 102

7. References 108

8. Trailers 112

Digital Story: “Competing Literacies: The Case of Video Game Trailers.”
Introduction

On December 4, 2006 Microsoft and Bungie Studios released the first trailer for Halo 3, the highly-anticipated conclusion to a video game franchise that had already sold over 11 million copies. The 60–second teaser, titled “Starry Night,” ran just once, reaching an estimated 7.9 million households during a Monday Night Football game between the Philadelphia Eagles and Carolina Panthers. The trailer debuted nearly one year before gamers would be able to play the game on their Xbox 360 game consoles (Hein 2007). When that release date finally arrived, Halo 3 would earn over $170 million in 24 hours (Henderson 2007).

Video game trailers are typically 30 second to 3 minute long promotional films that promote upcoming video games. They are often released on TV, on the Internet, and even in movie theaters prior to a video game’s arrival on store shelves. Some game trailers are explicit sales pitches, others are fan-service, but all are subsidiaries to the video game itself. In this regard, the video game trailer emulates the movie preview and the film teaser. Movie studios and distributors release trailers in order to announce a new film or promote an upcoming DVD; video game developers and publishers use game trailers to announce new video games.

But understanding video game trailers strictly in terms of formal precedent presents a problem. On the one hand, as the reception of the “Starry Night” trailer
suggests, both the video game industry and millions of gamers willingly invest time and energy in game trailers. Websites like GameTrailers.com and GameVideos.com host libraries of downloadable trailers and community feedback that users access daily. And, as we will see, trailers like “Starry Night” are becoming part of both public and private discourse; they are sites of sophisticated visual analysis that often bridge gamers with mainstream voices. However, as game trailers enter public domain, audiences respond to trailers in conflicting ways. Perhaps because society already views video games with caution, few mainstream voices have devoted thought to video game trailers. Neither media critics nor game studies scholars have examined video game trailers. This wealth of community investment and lack of critical insight has lead to a problem of valuation exacerbated by the absence of a useable vocabulary.

While this lack of vocabulary may seem trivial in the case of video game trailers, it is not novel. Inadequate language is a problem common to nearly all discourse around new media and technology. Moreover, this lack of vocabulary has consequences. To paraphrase Langdon Winner, the language we use to describe media and technology is political. Our language affects both our understanding and our experience of the world around us.

This problem of incomplete and incommensurate literacies recently played out in a public clash between New York City’s Mayor Bloomberg and online gaming
communities. After the release of a trailer for the game *Grand Theft Auto IV*, Mayor Bloomberg publicly responded that the city of New York would not endorse any video game that depicted violence in its city. Mayor Bloomberg’s comments quickly made mainstream headlines. And, while gaming communities defended the game and its trailer against Bloomberg’s characterization, these fan voices were largely ignored.

For the purposes of this project, Mayor Bloomberg’s reaction to the trailer for *Grand Theft Auto IV* serves as a case study for the recurring conflict between audiences who read texts in diverging ways. Bloomberg offers a particularly compelling case because he is expressly a political figure. While politics are inscribed in all readings and across all communities, focus on a politician makes it easier to recognize the various political natures of these competing readings.

With this problem of competing readings in mind, I will look at video game trailers in terms of *literacy*. In particular, I will look at video game trailers through the work of James Paul Gee. Gee, the chair of literacy studies at Arizona State University, argues that literacy is both multimodal and malleable. Literacy is not simply reading and writing the printed word; instead, literacy encompasses multiple modes of expression. Literacies develop over time with respect to various communities – it is a living social reality that evolves with the world around it.
I have divided my thesis into three chapters. The first chapter builds a history of video game trailer literacy, tracing a line from pre-cinematic publicity to motion picture previews to video game trailers. In this chapter, I expand on Lisa Kernan’s work on film trailers. In her book *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers*, Kernan argues that film trailers both reflect and revise the model of pre-cinematic publicity. Film trailers mimic the appeals of pre-cinema entertainment, while capitalizing on the new affordances of film. Similarly, video game trailers both reflect and revise the model of film trailers. Video game trailers emulate the styles and appeals of film trailers while also constructing arguments in ways unique to their form – ways that often encourage multiple readings from audiences.

In my second chapter I look specifically at these audiences to see how competing trailer literacies develop. In this section, I look closely at Gee’s work on multimodal literacy as a social process in order to argue that competing trailer literacies are legitimized and enforced within local communities – what Gee terms “affinity groups.” Adding to Gee, I argue that affinity groups adopt both top-down and bottom-up strategies of enforcement, each of which constructs literacy around video game trailers in unique ways.

With affinity groups and competing literacies in mind, my final chapter looks at the political consequences of these competing literacies. In particular, I use the case of
*Grand Theft Auto IV* and Mayor Bloomberg to compare the readings of mainstream voices to those of fan communities. Building on Henry Jenkins’ work, I argue that fan communities are nuanced readers of video game trailers. More specifically, recognizing the depth of fandom and the affordances of digital literacies, I argue that fan-made trailers offer a counterpoint to mainstream readings and mainstream politics. Although unconventional and even negligible in terms of a conventional print-based literacy, these fan-made trailers are playful, persuasive arguments that demonstrate the expressive potential of new media and the difficulties we encounter when reading them through old literacy practices.

**Justification**

Video game trailers present a case study for a larger problem of emerging literacies. Video game trailers are just one of many new media forms, more of which seem to develop every day. As scholars like Eric Beinhocker remind us, the growth of technology and information networks has led to a surge of new media practices for which we must develop new critical vocabularies, new literacies and new politics (Beinhocker 2007).

The political consequences of how we contend with these emergent literacies are substantial. In the United States, for example, literacy (in the singular) is traditionally viewed as the cornerstone of civic engagement. Western politics supports itself through
free speech and the free flow of ideas. Literacy, however, is the gatekeeper. Literacy is not only the ability to read and write, but the very choice of what is worth reading and what is worth writing. Literacy is both ability and agency. Even in colloquial terms, to be literate is to be intelligent and capable; to be illiterate is to be ignorant and inept.

This nexus of literacy, the literate, and *civitas* is repeatedly embodied, for example, in than the United States’ Supreme Court of the 20th century. In questions of censorship, artistic expression and freedom of speech, the Supreme Court has demonstrated repeatedly its investment in the practice of literacy and the politics of reading and writing. Judge Woolsey’s 1933 decision on Joyce’s *Ulysses* and the Court’s 1966 decision on Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* are testament to this fact. In both cases, not only did the Court rule on the particulars of the cases, but in so doing Court Justices offered deliberate and sophisticated readings of the texts upon which the cases focused. Woolsey’s reading of Joyce’s famously difficult novel was so insightful that publishers continue to reprint it in many editions of the book today (see Joyce 1990, Vantage edition).

Compare this demonstration of mastery to mainstream interrogations of emerging media practices. Few, if any, mainstream voices express complex opinions based on deep experiences with new media texts. Specifically with regard to video games and video game trailers, there is a disconnect between experience and opinion. Media figures often criticize and condemn video game texts while simultaneously
admitting to ignorance of the games themselves (Kollar) (Whittell). And this is by no means isolated to the world of video games; rather, as scholars like Jenkins emphasize, new media and new technology are often dismissed or disparaged. Common conceptions of social, cultural, and literary merit rarely respond to emerging media forms and literacies.

**Form and Function**

What are video game trailers? This is a question best answered through contrast. Although few audiences are familiar with video game trailers, most audiences recognize movie previews and teaser trailers. In formal terms, movie trailers and video game trailers are quite similar: both trailers refer to another text through a brief, self-contained film clip. Because of this compression, the relationship between the part and the whole — between the trailer and the product it promotes — varies widely.

We can compare film and game trailers by looking at both the *Halo 3 “Starry Night” trailer* and the trailer for the 1997 Paul Verhoeven film, *Starship Troopers*. This comparison is not unreasonable: Both *Halo 3* and *Starship Troopers* are science-fiction stories that imagine an interstellar war between humanity and an army of insect-like alien species. Moreover, in both cases, the trailer not only promotes a forthcoming text, but also relates to previous works. The *Halo 3* trailer alludes to the previous *Halo* video
games, while the *Starship Troopers* trailer builds on the novel by Robert Heinlein on which the film is based.

At first glance, the *Starship Troopers* trailer is stereotypic of big-budget action movies. It opens with a wide establishing shot of Earth from space, as the booming narrator announces, “*In every age, there is a cause worth fighting for. But in the future the greatest threat to our survival will not be man at all…*” The trailer goes on to show shots of military platoons and giant “bug” invaders, intercut with special effects shots and close-ups of the film’s cast.

Using generic (i.e. genre specific) images and dialogue as cues for the audience, the trailer relies on establishing shots from space, on futuristic military props and on the narrator’s references to galactic warfare to establish rapport with its audience. The too-familiar shots from space and the bombastic military references imply that *Starship Troopers* will be both a war film and science-fiction. Visual cues unmistakably identify several young actors and actresses as the sympathetic protagonists of the movie; special effect shots that linger on starships and alien armies signal savvy audiences that this film is unlikely to explore its characters with depth. Every detail of the trailer is a cue to the audience, encouraging the audience to re-construct the upcoming movie in their minds.
Similarly, the “Starry Night” ad relies on recognizable imagery to signal audiences about the upcoming Halo 3 game. Here, however, that imagery is at first concealed. The trailer opens with two children on a grassy field under a starry sky. “Ever wonder what’s up there?” the boy asks. “Like what?” the girl responds. “Maybe someone up there is wondering what it’s like here.” “I guess. Do you think we’ll ever meet them?” The boy answers, “I hope so, don’t you?” Suddenly, the screen flashes from night to screeching, shrieking day as the children and the grass give way to an empty dusty plain. Halo’s armor-clad protagonist, Master Chief, picks up his helmet and slams down a metal orb which erupts into a translucent geodesic shield, just in time to absorb an enormous explosion. Barely waiting for the dust to fall, Master Chief grabs the rifle from his back, sprints off the edge of a cliff and into a group of angry and armed alien soldiers.

Each of these shots is thick with cues for the trailer’s audience. For those unfamiliar with the Halo franchise, the “Starry Night” trailer will seem quite similar to that of Starship Troopers. The initial discussion of extraterrestrials, followed by the shots of a soldier running to fight his alien enemies indicates to an audience unfamiliar with Master Chief that this game will probably be both science-fiction and war-themed, that it will probably feature futuristic rifles and geodesic shields.
However, different audiences recognize different cues. While novice audiences may read the “Starry Night” trailer analogously to the Starship Troopers trailer, fans of the Halo series will read the same visual cues in very different ways. To gamers, Master Chief is iconic. His signature green UNSC armor signals to every Halo fan that this trailer is a Halo trailer, and that it should be read as such: Fans of the Halo series not only read the “Starry Night” trailer in terms of narrative, but also in terms of interactive play. For example, Master Chief’s translucent geodesic shield became a hot topic across gaming websites and forums: “Is the so-called Shield Grenade a game element?”

Working from what was already known, gamers used the evidence presented in the trailer to build complex arguments about the yet-to-be-released video game. “Will the shield grenade be the fourth grenade type we can use in Halo 3 — alongside the frag’s, plasma’s and spike’s? “ “Is the ‘bubble’ grenade related to forerunner tech in any way?”

(Frankie’s Q&A from #HBO IRC) Fans invested in Halo read each detail of the 60 second clip through their own complex experiences with the series, both in terms of game play and the greater narrative arc of the franchise. Thus, while the trailer offers the same cues to all audiences, different audiences extract different meanings from those cues.

This is the problem of competing literacies. Different audiences read the same trailer in different ways. Audiences read according to institutional and idiosyncratic rules that represent their interests and their understanding of media. Among fan
communities especially, it is a recurring issue. Looking back to *Starship Troopers*, one can imagine how a general audience might approach the trailer differently than an audience familiar with the works of Robert Heinlein. Readers of Heinlein’s work might be excited by the prospect of a film adaptation of Heinlein’s novel. More likely, however, audiences fond of Heinlein’s novel might be alarmed by the mediation of Heinlein’s work through the conventions of Hollywood blockbusters. Adding yet another layer to this confusion is that, while the original *Starship Troopers* trailer provides the audience with familiar tropes and cues, none of these cues divulge the satirical nature of the final film. Thus, as many have experienced, (particularly those who went to see *Starship Troopers* after watching the trailer,) trailers of all varieties have the potential to mislead.

Specifically with regard to video game trailers, the problem of competing literacies is compounded by *transmediation*. Audiences watch video game trailers, but gamers *play* video games. Whereas movie trailers are short films that refer to longer ones, game trailers offer a different experience than games themselves. Audiences must make the conceptual leap from one medium to another; audiences use trailers to hypothesize what playing a game might be like. This becomes increasingly complex. The “Starry Night” trailer offers a glimpse at the upcoming *Halo 3* game, but this glimpse does not reveal any actual game play. While the *Starship Troopers* trailer
reassembles shots from the film itself, the Halo 3 trailer is quite literally *constructed*. The “Starry Night” ad is a work of computer graphics imagery separate from the video game itself. As one Bungie employee publicly stated, the trailer is “Not indicative of gameplay.” In other words, the images and video in the trailer are not the same images and video clips that players should expect to find in the final Halo 3 game (Frankie’s Q&A from #HBO IRC). The connection is tenuous. When audiences watch the “Starry Night” trailer they must fill in the blanks, so to speak, connecting the images of the trailer to the future game play.

**The ABCs of Video Game Trailers**

In this project, I will look at video game trailers and literacy through the work of James Paul Gee. Gee’s framework helps to explain why different audiences engage with a single text in multiple ways. Gee argues that literacy is multimodal, that literacy goes “beyond images and words to include sounds, music, movement, bodily sensations...” (Gee 2003:15) Multimodal texts lead to multiple interpretations because each mode, “each...domain has its own rules and requirements.” A “literary” audience reads *Starship Troopers* according to certain rules, which are different and distinct from the rules that a general audience uses to read a trailer like “Starry Night,” which are different and distinct from the rules that hardcore Halo fans use to read either trailer.
Video game trailers are one of many emerging multimodal, transmedial texts. Even within the video game industry, video game trailers are just one media form that game producers and distributors leverage to promote their product. The game industry uses trailers, developer commentaries, edited game play footage, raw game play footage, demos, game websites and development documentaries, among other tools. The myriad of media within this single industry reflects the complexity and combinations that multimodal texts afford. For purposes of this project, I will consider game trailers to be primarily audiovisual texts that are grounded on the conventions of film trailers.

The primary venue for these trailers is the Internet. The majority of trailers are released to the public either through video game homepages or through websites dedicated to video game journalism and media. Trailers that debut via traditional media, as was the case with “Starry Night,” are online within days, if not hours, posted by the game’s publishers and distributors, appearing as well on YouTube and other sites that cater to user-generated content. Often these online releases are elaborate. Companies will post countdown clocks that tick away the days, minutes and seconds until the release of a game’s first official trailer. And, more often than not, when the clock strikes zero, these websites are temporarily disabled by the flood of simultaneous viewers they receive. Even offline, though, these trailer “reveals” often become
spectacles, as companies use the trailer format to reveal new intellectual properties and new game designs at industry expositions and developer conferences (zoundsgx).

Despite the status of this form as advertisement, gamers are deeply invested in video game trailers. Video game trailers are one of the few pieces of advertising that audiences actively seek out. Fans sit in on the first ten minutes of an unpopular movie in order to see an extremely popular trailer; they watch and download trailers online and discuss trailers in forums and community message boards. Over 4.5 million players on Xbox Live continue to download trailers in HD resolution ready to be watched on their home television screens (Terrifying Xbox Live Stats Breakdown). Users on websites like GameTrailers.com and GameVideos.com provide user feedback and comments on each new trailer, evaluating and dissecting each frame’s potential significance. Even journalistic websites feature segments “deconstructing” controversial or publicized game trailers. And this is to say nothing of those fans that create their own trailers, using the official advertisements as raw material, inspiration, or points of departure.

The result is a reciprocal relationship: game players and game makers invest themselves in video game trailers. The Halo 3 campaign demonstrates this relationship quite well. The original Halo and its sequel, Halo 2, were among the best selling console games of all time. The two games created a Halo franchise, with fans worldwide buying
Halo merchandise and reading novels set in the Halo universe. As a result, Halo 3 had a guaranteed customer base. No one doubted that the game would sell. And yet, Microsoft and Bungie began publicizing Halo 3 almost a year in advance of the game’s release. The “Starry Night” trailer was the first piece of a “five-phase marketing blitz,” culminating in a $10 million, six-week campaign, consisting of five live-action Halo 3 trailers – one of which did not even air until after the game had been released (Hein 2007). And this investment paid off. Halo 3 earned an estimated $170 million in its first day of sales – the largest one day total of any entertainment product, from Hollywood films to Harry Potter novels (Henderson).

This same investment recurs daily through popular gaming websites. Sites like GameVideos and GameTrailers only exist because so many users scan the sight each day. Because users flock to the site, game companies are willing to provide trailers as free content. What ad executive would pass up free access to a segmented audience actively pursuing her marketing message? In fact, the demand for trailers is so sufficient that websites charge membership fees for better quality trailer videos. Trailers are offered free to all users, but some users are willing to pay money to see higher quality, higher resolution versions of these advertisements. This is a very real investment in trailers, both by the companies producing them and the audiences consuming them.
As I suggested earlier, this investment is often overlooked. Popular media coverage of game trailers tends to focus on only the most extreme cases. The *Halo* ad campaign, for example, garnered extensive coverage, but this coverage stemmed from *Halo 3*’s extensive budget. Because few other trailers have received any media attention, it is hard to read the *Halo* coverage as anything but a fascination with strange social practices – how remarkable, the stories seem to imply, that this much money is spent on video games and advertisement. Any mention of non-monetary investment in trailers is all but lost. Instead, trailers often catch the media spotlight when they are controversial. As mentioned, when the trailer for *Grand Theft Auto IV* was released, New York City’s Mayor Bloomberg publicly stated that the city of New York would not endorse any video game that depicted violence in his hometown. While Bloomberg’s criticism is of the forthcoming game, this criticism derives squarely from the publicly released video game trailer.

With at best media distortion and at worst media oversight, trailers are strangely positioned as a medium that is simultaneously watched and ignored. Millions of fans download streaming video of the latest trailers, scouring the web for trailer announcements and countdown timers, debating trailer quality and meaning on internet forums, and distributing homemade trailers as responses and re-articulations of industry advertising. However, mainstream media and academics leave the issue
largely untouched. Video game trailers are a new media form in need of critical examination. As it stands, we have no tools by which to reconcile mainstream readings like those of Mayor Bloomberg with those of online communities and gaming websites. Both Bloomberg’s interpretation and fans’ interpretation have their own merits. Yet, what leads Bloomberg to one interpretation and fans to another? To use Gee’s terminology, how does one multimodal literacy differ from another? How do competing literacies develop, and more importantly, how do they shape interpretation and understanding of media content?
The Literature on Literacy

In The Gutenberg Galaxy, Marshall McLuhan argues that literacy is intertwined with technology and social practice (McLuhan 1962). Distinguishing between scribal and print literacies, McLuhan argues that the introduction of the printing press transformed what it meant to read and write. Before the printing press, literacy could be understood as a mixture of rote repetition and public display. Scribes transcribed manuscripts to be read aloud and in public. After the printing press, however, literacy became a more private phenomenon. The printing press put printed materials into individual hands – a move that gradually transformed reading and writing into a personal, isolated practice.

McLuhan prefaces an important argument that recurs in literacy and media studies: literacy is best understood as an ongoing process. As a social practice, literacy reflects the world around it. As the printing press became commonplace, literacy reflected new technological and social realities. The technology of the printing press put more books into more hands. As more individuals became readers, the social practice of reading shifted from public to private space. In other words, both the new technology and the new social practices changed the meaning of literacy.

Following McLuhan’s lead, my work looks at literacy as both a social and technological process. Because there is no substantive literature on video game trailers,
I look towards literacy and media studies as a guide. My review of literature, therefore, starts with foundational work on literacy and moves towards contemporary work on literacy with regard to digital media. Specifically to distinguish a literacy of video game trailers, I look briefly at scholarly work on trailers, advertising, persuasion, and video game studies.

**A Literate Apparatus**

The idea of literacy as social practice traces back to both Eric Havelock and Walter Ong. Havelock, a pioneer in literacy studies, argues that literacy is not merely the ability to read or write; rather, it is the social condition that develops with the advent of the written word. Looking particularly at Ancient Greece, Havelock argues that the shift from the spoken word to a standardized scribal alphabet marked a transition in society (Havelock 1988). As the Greeks moved from orality to literacy, Greek life underwent several changes. Havelock argues that literacy introduced the Greek psyche to the concept of an immanent self, an introduction which prefaced Greek philosophy and much of Western thought. Literacy, therefore, is not only a means of communication but also a transformative social and individual practice.

Building on Havelock’s work, Walter Ong more closely compares the social condition of literacy to that of orality. In his book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Ong argues that writing is a socially constructed technology. For Ong, there
is no “natural” way to read or write. Rather, writing is a tool that individuals can adapt to serve different purposes. Literacy, therefore, is both local and historical. Different groups adapt literacy to varying ends (Ong 2002).

Havelock and Ong are remarkable in their refusal to privilege literacy. Although both authors argue that literacy is a transformative social condition, both authors point to society’s own bias towards pre-literate and illiterate societies. Havelock argues that scholars must overcome this bias. Just as literacy affords specific social structures and self-conceptions, so orality – or the absence of literacy in general – provides other valuable social and individual affordances.

In line with Havelock and Ong, several scholars look at the social condition of literacy through time. In particular, DeCastell and Luke trace a history of literacy in the United States throughout the past 100 years. DeCastell and Luke argue that literacy moved through three distinct phases in the United States over the past century: aristocratic, industrial and technocratic (Castell et al. 1986). During the 19th century, literacy was an aristocratic practice, training the upper class for civic engagement. Then, with industrialization, literacy became an act of self-expression, a type of literacy which was quickly replaced by a technocratic, Fordist notion, wherein literacy trained members for the workforce.
With each of these shifts, DeCastell and Luke again emphasize that literacy is contextual. Like Ong, these scholars emphasize that there is no natural mode of literacy; rather, literacy serves different purposes in different places. Like Havelock, DeCastell and Luke emphasize the subtle relationship between social conditions and the practice of literacy. In each of DeCastell and Luke’s phases, literacy responds to cultural conceptions of both self and society. The aristocracy recasts literacy to meet their own vision of civic engagement and social order, while later technocratic and Fordist social thought again reworks literacy in its own image.

Bringing this line of thought to the present, George Landow argues that literacy is changing in response to contemporary technology. In *Hypertext: The Convergence of Contemporary Critical Theory and Technology*, Landow argues that hypertext and hypermedia transform the definition and practice of literacy. Landow argues that hypertext makes literacy more complex. Because hypertext is non-linear, readers must work harder to unpack meaning(s). Digital texts demand new reading strategies, ones that old notions of literacy cannot provide (Landow 1991).

Scholars like Landow argue that this new literacy has social consequences. Just as Havelock argues the shift from orality to literacy transformed the Greek social condition, Landow argues that the shift from print literacy to digital literacy transforms our own social condition. Like the printing press, new digital technologies create new
affordances. Hypertext and hyperlinks increase the availability and the production of texts, which in turn transforms both reading and writing. This is a cultural shift we often find ascribed to Web 2.0: digital texts replace taxonomies with folksonomies, top-down regulation gives way to bottom-up networks (O’Reilly 2005).

While almost all scholars agree with Landow that digital literacy has significant consequences, not all are optimistic about the changes to come. Roszak, Postman, Stoll, Birkerts and several others question the benefits of digital literacy over conventional print literacy (Roszak 1994). (Postman 1996) Birkerts in particular argues that digital literacy heralds the end of the conscientious reader. For Birkerts, the digital landscape is superficial (Birkerts 2006). Online texts encourage fleeting encounters with shallow material. Thus, the shift from print literacy to digital literacy supplants the virtue of knowledge with the valorization of information. More texts are produced; more texts are consumed. But the search for wisdom, Birkerts argues, is lost in the crowd.

Opposite Birkerts, scholars like Jay Bolter argue that the changes of digital literacy are unequivocally changes for the better. Like Birkerts, Bolter recognizes the power of digital literacy to change social structures and even the social condition. However, Bolter argues that the social condition of digital literacy serves humanity for the best. For Bolter, digital literacy is a one-size-fits-all affair (Bolter 2001). Digital computing and information communication technologies offer personalized networks.
with flexible levels of interaction. Digital literacy allows readers and writers to be as shallow or subtle as they wish. One can gloss over the latest headlines with RSS feeds or one can use ubiquitous computing to publish a blog of independent investigative journalism.

Despite their differing stances, authors like Bolter, Birkerts and Landow emerge from – or at least in tandem with – the growing field of New Literacy Studies (Lankshear 1997). Building on the work of James Gee and others, New Literacy Studies examines literacy as a social practice tied to both time and place (Lankshear and Knobel 2003). Gee, along with Knobel, Lankshear, Street and others, argues that literacy is never just reading and writing (Knobel 2002). Rather, individuals always read or write something in some way (Street 1985). In this sense, literacy is contextual. It is bound to social practice. It is bound to a specific group at a distinct moment in a particular place.

New Literacy Studies in general and Gee in particular frame my own research into video game trailers. In looking at video game trailers in terms of literacy I adopt the New Literacy Studies perspective, looking at a distinct group of readers with regard to a distinct type of text in a distinct social space. Moreover, Gee’s own work on literacy and video games helps unite the large body of literature on media literacy with the relatively inexistent literature on video game trailers.
Birth of a Video Game Trailer

Because my own project deals specifically with the literacy of video game trailers, it is important to examine those strands of academic work that distinguish these trailers from other texts. We can trace the literacy of video game trailers through multiple avenues. On the one hand video game trailers develop from film trailers, which in turn call upon the larger institutions of both Hollywood cinema and promotional advertising. On the other hand video game trailers are an offspring of the video game industry, a development partly explained by the emerging field video game studies. In order to preface a literacy of video game trailers, I will look briefly at literature in each of these fields.

Film & Persuasion

As their name implies, video game trailers call upon the history of film trailers. Like film trailers, video game trailers are short film clips that endorse and promote a larger cultural product. Like film trailers, video game trailers employ cinematic tropes, classical Hollywood editing and conventional narrative to address audiences in familiar ways. Because of the similarities between film and game trailers, both in their form and function, film studies offers a compelling perspective on video game trailers.

Lisa Kernan’s Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers is the only academic book dedicated to film trailers. In her text, Kernan looks at trailers from both
a historical and rhetorical viewpoint. First, Kernan builds a history of the trailer from pre-cinematic publicity to modern day multimillion dollar campaigns. Kernan argues that film trailers represent a modern extension of the circus barker and the vaudeville promoter. Like the circus barker and vaudeville promoter, the trailer sells experience.

Earl Chapin May recounts this commercialization of experience in his semi-historical, semi-auto-biographical account of the circus through history. In his book, *The Circus—From Rome to Ringling*, May reminds readers that the circus has been a part of human society for over 2000 years. Literally from Rome to Ringling Brothers Barnum & Bailey, the circus has appealed to its audiences through the senses. Circus posters revel in hyperbole. Circus parades blare through the streets. The circus itself is an experience – the “greatest show on earth” – and so, circus advertisements transform into an experience in and of themselves, another amusement for willing audiences (May 2007).

Kernan argues that trailers mimic this sensory appeal. Although we generally assume that movie previews sell a film on the quality of its narrative, Kernan argues that this is not the case. Rather, previews often resort to hyperbole and experience. Movie trailers play on enormous screens, with enormous speakers, to an enormous audience. They are loud and flashy, they are heavily edited, and they only have two-and-a-half minutes to capture an audience’s attention.
In terms of persuasion, Kernan’s work bridges trailers with more general research into the ways that audiences may be persuaded by media. As mentioned before, media studies and literacy studies have much in common, despite their departmental distance. For example, Albert Bandura’s work on social cognitive theory recalls the premise of New Literacy Studies: both media effects and literacy are social processes (Bandura 1976). Similarly, although beyond the scope of this work, scholars like Horkheimer (Horkheimer 1975), Adorno (Adorno 2001) and Marcuse (Marcuse 1991) theorize media influence in terms of commodification and the culture industry. Within this work, media and their effects are almost inseparable from a technological and social landscape. Regardless of the theory, however, work in media studies generally agrees that media are deeply persuasive.

And, while scholars remain ambivalent about the direct consequences of media persuasion, researchers argue convincingly for the effects of unintended consequences. Researchers like Mark Ritson and Richard Elliott, for example, look at how communities within an English high school adopt advertisements as a form of social capital. Knowledge of certain advertisements becomes a signal that one is part of the in-group. The advertisement becomes appropriated by different readers towards different ends (Ritson & Elliott 1995).
Looking particularly at fan communities, scholars like Henry Jenkins argue that audiences often criticize and rearticulate media. Jenkins argues that fan communities are sophisticated and subtle readers who deeply engage with media texts. These fans do not consume media as a whole, but rather “poach” bits and pieces that they find personally relevant. Communities become what de Certeau terms “textual poachers,” who reconstruct local meanings from global texts (Jenkins 2006). Fan communities become producers of their own texts by adapting and transforming outside messages.

*Video Game (Trailers)*

Beyond film and media persuasion, a literacy of video game trailers also draws upon a literacy of video games. Although few academics discuss trailers directly, video game studies is a growing academic field. Looking briefly at this body of work, we can continue to frame video game trailer literacy – the reading and writing of game trailers – from the larger field of literacy in general.

Video game studies emerges from early 20th century work on games and play. Scholars like Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois serve as the foundation of current research on video games and video game play. In *Homo Ludens* Huizinga describes the interpenetration of civilization and play. Huizinga uncovers play within nearly every institution and ritual throughout history – he details the relationship between play and language, play and law, play and war, play and philosophy. (Huizinga 1950) However,
Huizinga’s lasting legacy on game studies comes from his concept of the “magic circle.” Huizinga argues that games and play occur within a special realm, a magic circle, that is separate and safe from real-life consequences. Huizinga theorizes play as a free and voluntary activity disconnected from material interests and set apart from ordinary life. It is a safe-haven for competition and self-improvement.

Like Huizinga, Roger Caillois offers game studies an invaluable vocabulary with which to approach games and play. In his book *Man, Play and Games*, Caillois carefully extends Huizinga’s framework. Caillois offers a six-point definition of play: it is free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, and make believe. (Caillois and Barash 2001) Moreover, despite being separate and unproductive, Caillois theorizes that play reveals much about society itself. Caillois argues that a society’s choice of play reflects the culture, the values, and the beliefs that the society cherishes. Play is developmental, both for the individual and the community.

Several recent authors challenge the views set out by Huizinga and Caillois. In particular Brian Sutton-Smith removes himself from the direct discussion of play, and instead questions the rhetoric that individuals use to describe play. In *The Ambiguity of Play*, Sutton-Smith argues for his title – namely, that play is an ambiguous activity and that different authors describe it in different ways to suit different ends. (Sutton-Smith 1997)
Although Huizinga, Caillois and Sutton-Smith seem somewhat removed from video games and video game trailers, their work offers important insights into both. In particular, despite their disagreements, all three scholars recognize that play is malleable and often elusive. Play is a flexible activity, one that seemingly serves multiple purposes and seems to exist in an intangible, magical space. While these authors describe play in particular, the notion of flexibility is fundamental to both video games and video game trailers.

Scholars like Jesper Juul and Ian Bogost build their own work in video game studies on top of the work of early game and play theorists. In *Half-Real*, Juul looks particularly at the relationship between rules and narrative with game play. Juul argues that video games in particular must constantly negotiate between formal and informal rules. The game itself asserts rules that limit players’ choices. However, players often create and enforce informal rules as part of their own game play. Additionally, Juul argues that we can divide games into two general types: progression and emergent. (Juul 2005) Progression games carefully lead a player from step A to B to C. The player has limited choices and follows a linear path. Emergent games, on the other hand, open immersive game worlds to players, allowing them to choose their own path. Emergent games offer players a set of tools and encourage players to recombine those tools in creative and unexpected ways.
Ian Bogost builds on this distinction between progression and emergence in his book *Unit Operations*. Bogost argues that good video games support a unit operations approach rather than a systems operations approach. (Bogost 2006) In Bogost’s estimate, systems operations are top-down, prescriptive understandings. They attempt to totalize and exhaustively explain a phenomenon or behavior. Unit operations, on the other hand, display a level of emergence. Unit operations do not seek to quantify and control a phenomenon, but instead to build relationships from the bottom-up. Unit operations encourage units of cultural evolution. Expressed in terms of semiotics, unit operations represent *parole* while systems operations represent *langue*.

Moving from theory to practice, authors like Edward Castronova look at video games in cultural context. More specifically, in *Synthetic Worlds*, Castronova looks at massively multi-player online games from an economic and social perspective. Castronova argues that for all intents and purposes, the economic value of video games transfers seamlessly to real world economies. (Castronova 2005) Whereas Huizinga argues for a distinct and separate magic circle, Castronova posits a “semi-permeable membrane.” Video game worlds and real worlds are separate, but things can move between them. Currency in video game worlds can become real world currency. Labor markets in massively-multiplayer online games can affect labor markets in real world countries.
Coming full circle, we can bring Juul, Bogost and Castronova together with both Gee and New Literacy Studies. Both Juul’s contrast of progression and emergence, and Bogost’s contrast of systems operations and unit operations calls to mind Gee’s multimodal literacies. In Gee’s terms, progression and emergence present game players with two different literacies, each with particular rules and each with particular consequences. The same can be said for systems- and unit operations. We can roughly associate progression and systems operations as “old” literate functions, whereas emergence and unit operations represent new social practices and new literacies. In this sense, Castronova’s synthetic worlds become a place of emergent literacies, wherein meanings are conflated, wherein conventional reading and writing is replaced by playful discovery and inventive expression.

My own project looks toward this shift in literacy. In particular, the following chapter looks closely at how a literacy of video game trailers emerges from the history of film trailers and pre-cinematic publicity. Following the arguments of Havelock and Ong, I look at literacy as a technology that develops through social practice. Moreover, following Gee and others, I look at the multiple literacies that join together in the reading and writing of new media.
The first movie trailer debuted in 1912 at Rye Beach, New York. The trailer literally trailed a short film serial named “The Adventures of Kathlyn.” As the serial episode drew to a close, Kathlyn was thrown into a lion’s den; the trailer played on the suspense: “Does she escape the lion’s pit? See next week’s thrilling chapter!”

These two short sentences laid a path for an entire industry. As serials evolved into feature films, trailers followed. After “The Adventures of Kathlyn,” trailers advertised the next thrilling chapter of countless film genres, new franchises, and rising stars. By 1928 Warner Brothers opened its own trailer production company. By 1935 trailers began to feature the familiar optical wipes and superimposed graphics we see today. By 1938 the industry was hiring dedicated writers and commissioning specialized musical scores for their teasers (Kernan 2004). Finally, by 1964 the film industry formalized the trailer in the voice of James Earl Jones. Jones lent his vocal talents to a trailer for a film adaptation of Tennessee Williams’ The Night of the Iguana. The trailer featured a collection of quickly edited scenes, sprawling graphic text, and Jones’ stentorian voice, all of which became industry standard. Today, trailers are a multimillion dollar industry, building anticipation for new movies months before their scheduled release. Film companies publicize trailer premieres, fans flock to otherwise
blasé films in order to see trailers debut, ad companies send hundreds of trailers to our television screens in 30 second snippets, and internet users scour websites to watch the latest trailers in high-definition streaming video.

But this multimillion dollar advertising industry is only half the story. While “The Adventures of Kathlyn” presented a script that trailers follow to this day, that first trailer also grew out of another history. Film trailers emerged from pre-cinematic rhetoric. The first trailer emulated the hyperbole of the circus barker, the sensation of the circus poster, the performance of the vaudevillian promoter. Like both the circus and vaudeville, the trailer sells cinema as affective experience. Trailers transform cinema into “The Greatest Show on Earth,” reminding audiences that each new serial, each new franchise, and each new film presents another thrilling chapter for audiences to experience.

Thus, the trailer for “The Adventures of Kathlyn” is situated between past and present. Like all new media forms, the first trailers relied on history as a guide. By emulating pre-cinematic publicity, these trailers appealed to audiences in familiar and recognizable ways. However, film trailers also developed their own unique rhetoric beyond the pre-cinematic. Film trailers capitalize on the affordances of film, addressing audiences in ways that neither vaudeville nor the circus could. While audiences could sample the vertigo of the circus before buying tickets, they could “sample” a film by
watching a short film trailer. In this way, the film trailer developed an idiosyncratic rhetoric based on pre-cinematic appeals, but grounded in film form.

Today, video game trailers stand in this same position, poised between past and present. Video game trailers represent an evolution of the trailer; they are simultaneously cultural kin and alien offspring of film trailers. Just as “The Adventures of Kathlyn” simultaneously built on pre-cinematic tropes while developing new cinematic rhetoric, video game trailers build on their film counterparts while developing their own persuasive strategy. On the one hand, video game trailers directly emulate film trailers. Like film trailers, video game trailers promote new video games prior to their release. Both film and game trailers feature Hollywood editing styles, voice-over narration, and hyperbole. Audiences scour websites for streaming video game trailers, marketers transform trailers into 30 second TV spots, and game companies hype trailer debuts as media events. Despite these similarities, however, video game trailers are not film trailers. Film trailers are short film clips that promote longer film features. Video game trailers are short film clips that promote longer video game play. In other words, audiences watch game trailers but audiences play games. As with the circus and film trailers, this is a subtle but fundamental distinction, one which foregrounds a shift in rhetoric and audience response.
Lisa Kernan’s *Coming Attractions: Reading American Movie Trailers* offers a convincing framework for analyzing this rhetoric. Although Kernan never takes up the question of video game trailers, her work offers a history of trailers in general. By tracing a history of trailers from pre-cinema to film to video games, one begins the difficult task of writing a creation story for video game trailers. While this is by no means the only creation story, it is nonetheless a useful foundation for theorizing game trailers within a cultural context. Building on Kernan, I argue that video game trailers, like their film counterparts, approach audiences through enthymematic logic; video game trailers omit parts of an argument and ask audiences to fill in the blanks. These argumentative gaps allow audiences to read trailers in multiple ways. Moreover, because audiences do not consume video game trailers and video games in the same ways, video game trailers resemble both the circus barker and vaudeville promoter: video game trailers are flexible texts that mediate one experience through another.

**Trailer Taxonomy**

Nearly everyone has some experience with movie trailers. Trailers are ubiquitous; they appear on television, in theatres, across myriad websites and in multiple department stores. As a result, trailers have strong formal conventions that audiences can both recognize and read. Without much difficulty we can parse a complex set of patterns and signs within a trailer and decode its specific messages. We
recognize special effects shots, celebrity faces, and trailer tropes (“This summer...from the director who brought you...the final chapter...,” etc.) And yet, while most audiences are expert readers of trailer rhetoric, few possess a critical vocabulary with which to analyze trailer rhetoric. Most audiences are likely to describe trailers with broad value judgments: “I liked it,” “I didn’t like it,” “It gives away too much of the plot” (Kernan 2004:18). This juxtaposition of above-average readers with below-average vocabularies underscores Lisa Kernan’s work on film trailers. Kernan, a film studies scholar, builds up a critical vocabulary for trailers in Coming Attractions.

Kernan fleshes out the argument we have already alluded to: namely, that film trailers are an outgrowth of pre-cinematic advertising. Kernan argues that film trailers retain much of earlier publicity forms, while adding cinematic idiosyncrasies to the mix; they are “both like and unlike the pre-cinematic attractions.” Film trailers are akin to vaudeville and circus promoters. Both vaudeville and the circus promote themselves through the “spectacle or ‘the show’...rather than narrative content” (Kernan 2004). Audiences come to the circus for the experience and emotion, rather than the narrative content. Despite the (apparent) importance of narrative to most motion pictures, movie trailers often rely on these appeals, prioritizing the experience and spectacle of Hollywood cinema. The trailer “invites audience participation (like the circus Barker) and emerges from a rhetoric of hyperbole (like the circus poster), usually singling out
the film’s attractions as the phenomenon or event that will draw audiences” (Kernan 2004:18). Trailers for travelogues and period pieces invite the audience to see new worlds, while horror films and action movies encourage an audience to feel the tension and struggles of characters on screen. And nowhere is spectacle more predominant than in the trailer for the blockbuster, wherein enormous set-pieces and embellished special effects become visual hyperbole, selling a film experience on anything but its narrative content, building hype until, ultimately, the “advent and event become indistinguishable” (Kernan 2004:23).

In this light, Kernan views trailers as deliberately persuasive texts – and, therefore, as rhetorical texts. Kernan approaches film trailers through rhetorical theory. For Kernan rhetoric “comprises both the means by which trailers sell films and an analytic method to examine the persuasive strategies and appeals to audiences within the trailers themselves” (Kernan 2004:37). Rhetoric is both a tool that trailers use to construct arguments and a tool we can use to analyze those arguments. Like the circus barker and the circus poster, Kernan argues that film trailers construct rhetorical appeals through a reasoned argument. This argument is not expository, but affective. Film trailers argue through audio-visual signs, persuading audiences to buy movie tickets and DVDs by appealing to celebrities, directors, and genres.
Kernan asserts that all trailers are rhetorical syllogisms that work through *enthymeme*. An enthymeme, or shortened argument, “omits one of the logical steps within a syllogism, allowing it to remain as an implicit assumption within the logic of the remaining terms.” (Kernan 2004:40) An enthymeme is an argumentative fill-in-the-blank. Whereas a conventional syllogism moves from premise to argument to conclusion, an enthymeme omits a chunk of the argument. An enthymeme leaves the audience to fill in the missing pieces. Perhaps the most clichéd example of an enthymeme is an alcohol advertisement featuring male and female models. Without relying on any explicit (or rational) argument, these commercials imply that purchasing their product will transplant you into a world of beautiful people and beautiful places.

Kernan argues that film trailers use this enthymeme to persuade audiences. When trailers appeal to audiences, trailers leave out pieces of their argument. When, for example, a trailer prominently boasts, “From the director that brought you *Chinatown,*” the trailer uses enthymeme to imply that *this* movie will be like *that* movie, because this movie involves the same individual. This argument is never openly stated. Instead, trailers let audiences fill in the blank. Audience members make their own link between the premise and conclusion of a trailer – links that are tentative and contingent.

But how do audiences fill in these enthymematic blanks? How do audiences know how to read the clichéd alcohol ad or the generic boasts of a film trailer?
According to Kernan, audiences understand trailers because audiences understand specific referent systems. These referent systems are both “a body of social knowledge...plus a body of specific cinematic conventions, a body of expectations about what films can offer narratively” (Kernan 2004). In other words, audiences understand trailers because audiences are familiar with certain signs and symbols; most audiences recognize that saloons and six-shooters characterize Westerns, that indie-music and unconventional editing characterize independent films.

However, these signals are not always straightforward, as the author of the enthymeme sacrifices certainty of interpretation in exchange for ambiguity of argument. Audiences can complete the enthymeme in multiple ways. Trailers are open texts. Kernan describes this openness within the trailer for *Malcolm X*. The trailer opens with the face of Denzel Washington as Malcolm X staring through prison bars – an image that Kernan argues is open to multiple readings. First, the image calls upon a long history of Denzel Washington as a Hollywood celebrity. By including Denzel’s face, the trailer implies that this movie will be reminiscent of Washington’s movies. However, the image also calls upon “a large cultural lexicon of photographic portraiture,” upon Hollywood’s own ability to frame political figures, upon Hollywood’s history of African-American leading men, and upon both the social and written history of Malcolm X in public consciousness. In other words, we can imagine how audiences
with different histories might approach the *Malcolm X* trailer with different “referent systems.” Some audiences might read the trailer as another Denzel Washington film or another Spike Lee “joint”. Others might read it as an extension of Alex Haley’s written biography of Malcolm X. Others might read it as a struggle between the African-American community and Hollywood industry over issues of public history.

In order to gain some handle on this flexibility, Kernan narrows her examination of trailer enthymemes to five primary appeals: genres, stars, plot, spectacle and realism. All trailers, Kernan argues, appeal to some combination of these five. The trailer for *Malcolm X*, for example, appeals to both genres and stars. The trailer opens with Denzel Washington’s face and highlights his transformation from young criminal to political leader. Through this transformation, the trailer highlights the fashion and fads of each era. Denzel goes from zoot suit to prison blues to matching suit and tie. In the highly compressed economy of the film trailer, each of these details is a signal to the reader; each appeals to an audience’s knowledge of popular history and familiarity with certain cinematic tropes. Using these tropes we can identify the enthymemes. First, the trailer appeals to Denzel Washington’s celebrity. The implied argument is as follows: You like Denzel Washington. This movie features Denzel Washington. You will also like this movie. Similarly, the trailer appeals to genre. This movie is a biography. You like certain things about biographies (like character progression, like theatrical settings.)
You will also like this movie. The argument is implied and signaled by the images of the trailer. Denzel Washington’s face and image encourage audiences to read the trailer as an appeal to celebrity. The fashion and fads of each era encourage audiences to read the trailer as an appeal to genre.

Whatever the case, it is up to the audience to fill in the enthymematic blank. As Kernan writes, “trailers utilize enthymemes...which rely on implicit assumptions that the audience is enjoined to ‘fill in,’ thus becoming complicit with the advertising argument to the degree that they do so” (Kernan 2004:40). In other words, the very flexibility of trailers makes them rhetorically effective. By requiring audiences to fill in the blanks, trailers reject the notion of a passive viewer, and instead encourage an active relationship between the audience and the promotion. Participation is crucial to enthymematic appeals.

**From Film Trailers to Game Trailers**

Video game trailers and film trailers are remarkably similar. Both trailers present themselves as short film clips. Both feature narrative voice-overs, jump-cuts, eye-line matches, and establishing shots. Video game trailers often go so far as to simulate real world camera distortions, producing digital lens flare and depth of field. Both film and game trailers debut in movie theaters, during television commercial breaks, and as online content. Particularly online, video game trailers and film trailers
become nearly indistinguishable. Audiences view both kinds of trailers with the same applications and download them with the same browsers, with the same file extensions. Digitally, both trailers are compressed, encrypted and written to disk in identical ways. Online audiences discuss, debate, and rate both trailers indistinguishably.

Because of these similarities, it is useful to apply much of Kernan’s work on film trailers to video game trailers. Kernan defines a trailer as “a brief film text that usually displays images from a specific feature film while asserting its excellence, and that is created for the purpose of projecting in theaters to promote a film’s theatrical release” (Kernan 2004:1). Several aspects of this definition are noteworthy. First, the trailer is itself a brief film. It is not a photograph or one-sheet; it is not a printed review or transcript. “Trailers are a cinema” (Kernan 2004:2). Audiences watch trailers and audiences watch films. Moreover, studios create trailers to project in theaters to advertise a movie’s release. Thus, for Kernan, trailers are an analog form. While studios may distribute trailers online, this is not their primary means of dissemination. Finally, it is interesting to note that Kernan sees trailers as “asserting [the] excellence” of the film it presents. This is not particularly surprising – after all, trailers are usually made to sell a movie – however, this distinction eliminates the possibility of trailers made to critique a film, a common occurrence among fan communities in the digital age.
Contrasting this definition with video game trailers. Just as film trailers emulate and evolve from pre-cinematic publicity, video game trailers emulate and evolve from film trailers. On the one hand, game trailers imitate film trailers in several ways; game trailers are also brief film texts that usually assert a game’s excellence, and most are created to promote a game’s official release. But, like film trailers before them, video game trailers also have a distinct relationship with their audience that affords a distinct rhetoric. Because audiences watch trailers but players play games, video game trailers must sell the experience of playing a game through the experience of watching a short movie clip. This is a challenge that calls upon the circus barker and the vaudeville performer – like both pre-cinematic promoters, video game trailers mediate between two different activities. Video game trailers use visual hyperbole and affective appeals to sell the experience of play.

As a result, video game trailers are flexible. Because watching a game trailer is removed from playing an actual game, the cues of video game trailers are often ambiguous. When, for example, gamers watch the “Starry Night” trailer, they are uncertain which details in the trailer reflect the upcoming video game. The meaning of things like the bubble shield, the children’s dialogue and Master Chief’s appearance are vague. This uncertainty allows different audiences to read different meanings into game trailers.
Furthermore, unlike film trailers, video game trailers are primarily a digital medium. While some video game trailers may show in theaters, studios almost always release video game trailers online. Video game trailers are primarily a digital text – downloaded and uploaded as often as they are watched and discussed. And while this presents a very real difference in distribution, it also points to the problem of trailers as explicitly promotional texts. Because game trailers are digital, they are easily reassembled. Fan communities often remake trailers into new cultural products. While these remade trailers often grow out of passion for a particular game, they just as often represent a critique of the original trailer’s vision. Consequently, video game trailers do not always assert the excellence of their source material; rather, fan-made trailers potentially provide audiences with a material outlet for agency.

And yet, despite these differences, we can nonetheless analyze film trailers and game trailers through a common rhetorical frame. Like Kernan’s film trailers, video game trailers use enthymeme to make implicit promises to trailer audiences. Game trailers equally rely on appeals to plot, genre, spectacle, realism and stars; however, each of these appeals is transformed in the move from film to video game trailer.

*Game Trailer Enthymeme: William Shatner, Mr. T and Me*

Two recent trailers feature Mr. T and William Shatner discussing their life inside the video game *World of Warcraft*. Both trailers follow the celebrities’ transition from a
white soundstage into the vibrant game-world of Azeroth. Shatner introduces himself as a shaman, “a conduit of the ancient forces of nature,” while Mr. T barks, “I’m Mr. T and this is my night elf Mohawk” (Transcribed by author.) The trailer’s announcer corrects Mr. T that Mohawk is not a class in *World of Warcraft*, but Mr. T suggests he might be “pretty handy with computers” and may have “hacked the game and created a Mohawk class.” At the end of both 30 second spots, both Mr. T and William Shatner state their name and their *World of Warcraft* class, as the camera cuts from their physical bodies to their in-game avatars.

Consistent with Kernan’s observations about film, each of these *Warcraft* trailers works through enthymeme. Simple as it may be, both trailers imply that players will want *World of Warcraft* without explicitly arguing so. In William Shatner’s trailer, for example, Shatner voices the audience’s own concern: “You’re no doubt wondering, hey Shatner, how do I hurl bolts of lightning? – Simple, get *World of Warcraft*, dog.” The presumption is straightforward:

*You want* to hurl bolts of lightning;

This game will let you;

*Therefore:* Buy this game.

But what if you have no interest in hurling bolts of lightning? The enthymeme is flexible. The trailer leaves room for the audience to fill in other blanks. Do you want to
be a conduit for nature? *Warcraft* will let you. Do you want to “storm through mighty forests on [a] frost saber?” *Warcraft* will let you. Through enthymeme, any detail can become a justification, an avenue for audiences to shape their own message, and in so doing, become complicit in the trailer’s rhetoric. Shatner’s dialogue makes this freedom even more straightforward: “get *World of Warcraft*, dog. You can be anyone you want.”

We can narrow down this flexibility by adopting one of Kernan’s five appeals: the star appeal. Through star appeals, Kernan argues, film trailers play off both familiarity and novelty. The enthymeme becomes:

You liked this celebrity in the past;

You want to see this celebrity again;

This film is your opportunity.

However, unlike film trailers, the notion of a star is not straightforward with respect to massively-multiplayer online games like *Warcraft*. While Shatner and Mr. T are actual celebrities, they are also portrayed as players in *World of Warcraft*. Each trailer ends with the celebrity’s avatar on screen speaking the words; “I’m William Shatner and I’m a Shaman”; “I’m Mr. T and I’m a Night Elf Mohawk.” In this transition to avatar, Mr. T and Shatner are transformed on screen from physical celebrity to (pseudo) anonymous player. Like the clichéd alcohol advertisement, the *Warcraft* trailer implies that audiences who play the game can be like stars because these stars play *Warcraft*. The
game links celebrities and players together. Additionally, the celebrities become guarantors of quality. The very use of Mr. T and William Shatner—two representatives of a particular kind of male celebrity—suggests that the trailer is speaking to a particular generation. Even if the audience does not want to be like celebrities, they may trust the endorsement of these respected celebrity voices.

But, again, the enthymeme is ever accommodating. In the Warcraft trailer, this star appeal is reversible. When the trailer implies that playing the game will make me like Shatner, the trailer also implies that playing the game will make Shatner like me; the trailer implies that World of Warcraft can erase the distance between the celebrity and the nobody. Through the act of playing, the audience and the star are put on a level playing field. Both trailers end with celebrity avatars repeating their previous real-world introductions, and this detail is crucial. By replacing the physical bodies of Mr. T and Shatner, the trailer implies that audiences misread celebrity. Celebrity is not the recognizable face of a pop icon, but rather the ability of pop icons to construct identities. Anyone can be a celebrity in World of Warcraft because in World of Warcraft “you can be anyone you want.” But, again, audiences read these arguments into the trailer; through enthymeme, the trailer is flexible, the audience is complicit.
The Ethical Spectacle

While this flexibility opens trailer rhetoric to playful interpretations, it is important to remember that trailers are both “signifying systems and...[exhibit] promotional persuasiveness.” (ital. added.) As exhibitions of “promotional persuasiveness,” video game trailers are not always just about stars, genre, plot, spectacle and realism. Along with these appeals, one finds economics at the heart of almost all commercially produced trailers. This is not to say that all trailers must be read as commercial advertising. On the contrary, audiences often resist this reading. However, audiences are only half the picture; for the producers of game trailers, advertising is the primary goal. Even when trailers are made specifically for fan-service, they are nonetheless economic vehicles designed to (eventually) promote sales. Consequently, it is important to see how buying and selling are written into the enthymematic gap of trailer rhetoric.

With this in mind, I want to look at is the Halo 3 “Museum” trailer. This trailer was the first of several within Microsoft’s previously mentioned $10 million, four-week ad campaign heralding the release Halo 3. The Halo franchise puts players in the role of space soldier Master Chief, as he fights for humanity against a religious alliance of alien races known as the Covenant. The “Museum” trailer opens in a quiet, open hall of a seemingly modern museum. The words “Maj. Pawel Czenerk; USNC (ret.) 2551-2581”
flash on the screen as the camera follows an elderly man through the hall and up to a large glass-encased diorama. The camera zooms in on the diorama, offering extreme close ups of military figurines in the midst of a freeze-frame war, before the silence is broken by a documentarian’s question: “Can you tell us about the battle?” The elderly man recounts his story of the fight, as the camera focuses on increasingly strained and war-weary figurines; one toy soldier supporting another grimacing soldier in his lap, a group of soldiers petrified in the throes of death, surrounded by cotton-ball explosions. Finally, the documentarian asks, “How did you manage to keep it together?” Looking on the diorama, the retired soldier whispers, “We knew that Master Chief was still in the fight. He gave us hope.”

What is the rhetoric appeal of the “Museum” trailer? The trailer presents itself sincerely in the genre of a war documentary. Unlike the Warcraft ads described above, there is no irony in the dialogue between documentarian and soldier, nor in the juxtaposition of diorama and dialogue. The trailer presents itself as a factual account of history. Moreover, the trailer occurs anachronously. Ignoring the futuristic setting of Halo, the idea of a war documentary implies that the war of Halo 3 has already passed. The trailer presumes that the events of the game, which the audience has yet to experience, have already transpired. The setting and the name “Museum” imply
history. The museum commemorates an event that the player has yet to accomplish, yet has *already* accomplished.

This paradox creates a strange argument of obligation, related obliquely to the “predestination paradox” common in science fiction narratives. The trailer depicts a world that is the result of a war that has already come to pass; it is a world therefore dependent on Master Chief (as is made clear by the camera’s survey of the diorama’s narrative), and it is therefore a world dependent on the player. But the player’s status as *player* is largely dependent on his willingness to become a *buyer*. Thus, the trailer obligates its audience to buy and play *Halo 3*, a process which ensures this future will come to pass. Without the game-buyer, the scene of the “Museum” threatens to become at best a sham and at worst a tragedy: A museum dedicated to lost opportunity, to false heroes. In this reading, the “Museum” trailer leaves little room for agency in the act of game buying. There is no choice involved; rather, the trailer creates an ethical imperative – each figurine in the diorama represents a sacrifice that must be justified, another Maj. Pawel Czernek that must be protected. The “Museum” trailer becomes a peculiar political statement; both games and wars are not the result of choice, but rather they are an inevitable responsibility – one you should be willing to pay for.

Similarly, we can read the trailer for the game *Gears of War* as an enthymematic argument in favor of that game’s purchase. Both the visual and aural scene of this
trailer—titled “Mad World,”—depicts a world in which games are commodities, purchased for catharsis and community. Like Halo, Gears of War follows a futuristic soldier, Marcus Fenix, in his fight against alien invaders known as The Locust. Unlike the Halo ad, however, which features scenes filmed in the real world, this trailer features video taken from the game’s graphics engine, a fact that is not lost on the audience to which the publisher is appealing. Actors and scenery are replaced with computer generated models and worlds. Whereas the Halo ad implied a guarantee of heroism for the player/consumer, this ad offers the enthymeme built on its technology:

You like stunning graphics;

This game has stunning graphics...

The “Mad World” trailer is notable for its lack of dialogue. Though Marcus Fenix does speak in the Gears of War game, he is silent in the trailer. The only sound comes from a particularly haunting cover of the Tears for Fears song “Mad World” by Gary Jules— which, again, becomes another representational system for audiences to read. This soundtrack, along with the in-game visuals work to increase the flexibility of trailer interpretation by offering multiple audiences multiple modes of consumption.

Visually, the trailer opens with a dark and desolate landscape of urban decay. The world is colored in brown and gray tones as rain falls on the few fires and billows of smoke that surround Marcus and the fractured porcelain visage at his feet. Marcus
runs through the narrow streets of the town, as colors change from browns to cool blues, and it becomes increasingly clear that Marcus is not alone. The camera tightens on Marcus’ body as he charges faster down the street, eventually diving into a broken concrete building. As Marcus lifts himself off the ground he is faced with starry orange and yellow lights of a Locust army. Marcus’ gun flashes warm colors on his face and the camera pulls back as he stands dwarfed by the arachnid body of a Locust Corpser.

Reading this scene as an argument for buying the game itself, this movement from a cool, desolate, and destructive scene to a warm, inclusive one creates a sense of catharsis. At first Marcus is alone. His environment is cold and harsh and his only companion is the shattered face of a broken sculpture. However, by the end of the trailer the cold atmosphere is made warm, the isolation made bearable. This warmth and companionship may come from the muzzle of a gun and the menace of an army; but nonetheless, the scene has changed. Marcus now has a purpose, if only to survive. A purpose which the game player is encouraged to share. Buy Gears of War and become like Marcus Fenix – escape isolation, discover community, find meaning – if only through first-person shooting.

This argument is made more explicit through the audio track accompanying the visual scene. In the same way a visual scene carries over to the audience’s real life decision making, the lyrical scene of the “Mad World” trailer presents a rhetorical
argument. Because the trailer is just a minute long, only a portion of the “Mad World”
lyrics are included:

All around me are familiar faces, / Worn out places, worn out faces. / Hide my 
head, I want to drown my sorrow, / No tomorrow, no tomorrow. / And I find it 
kind of funny, / I find it kind of sad, / The dreams in which I’m dying are the best 
I’ve ever had. / I find it hard to tell you; / I find it hard to take; / When people run 
in circles it’s a very, very / Mad world. Mad world. (Transcribed by author.)

These lyrics can be read as a narrative of gaming as a whole. The “familiar faces” and 
“worn out faces” of the song become the familiar, worn out caricatures of video game 
narratives: yet another space soldier fighting yet another alien alliance. In this reading, 
video games become the “dreams in which I’m dying”; games are fictional spaces 
where death occurs repeatedly and remorselessly. “People run in circles” to clear a 
level, to solve a puzzle, to build a character, to die and to start the process anew.

Reading these lyrics as a text on game playing, and therefore game buying, one can see 
how the scene dictates a purpose for buying Gears of War. Just as the visual scene 
argues for inclusion and community through games, the audio scene suggests that 
games can be “the best [dreams] I’ve ever had.” Through enthymeme, the trailer 
constructs a purpose for the act of game playing through a scene of catharsis.

While this trailer may seem pessimistic – a “kind of funny,” “hard to tell,” joke 
wherein games provide an outlet to “drown [one’s] sorrow” through violence – we 
must remember that enthymemes are pliable. One can just as easily read the trailer as
opposing this concern with violence in video games. While undoubtedly related, the world of a trailer is not identical to the world that trailer describes. Conflict in the trailer is not the same as real-world conflict. More precisely, death in the trailer and death in the game are not the same as real-world death. For gamers, there is nothing pessimistic about a scene in which Marcus finds community through violence. For an audience who is already comfortable with violent game play, this violence, this “dream in which I’m dying,” is the very value that a game provides; death in video games does not represent an unfortunate end, but rather the freedom to try again, to learn from past missteps, and ultimately, to demonstrate one’s mastery over the environment. Gamers use violence as the justification, as the filler for the trailer’s enthymematic rhetoric. Within this context, games are a space where death is enjoyable, where “[running] in circles” is the fun. Death in games can be divorced from negative consequences; it can be rewarded and celebrated. In this reading, the “Mad World” is not the world of Gears of War, but instead the world where death is, in fact, painful and permanent.

**Flexibility and Confusion**

Ultimately, a single literacy of video game trailers is difficult to define. Because video game trailers require audiences to make a dizzying leap between watching and playing, these trailers offer ambiguous cues to audiences. Film trailers craft arguments by taking up pre-existing systems of signification and building upon them. Audiences
read film trailers through “a body of social knowledge...plus a body of specific cinematic conventions, a body of expectations about what films can offer narratively, and a set of desires” (Kernan 2004). Game trailers add an extra body of knowledge to the mix. While audiences read game trailers through social knowledge and cinematic conventions, they also read trailers in anticipation of agency. Audiences read trailers in terms of game design and interaction. Game trailers are transmedial: They not only stand in for a larger textual product, (i.e. the game itself), but they also stand in for an interactive experience (i.e. play). Like pre-cinematic publicity, video game trailers must sell an event, an experience – but experiences are notoriously difficult to describe.

I touched on this flexibility when reading of the “Mad World” trailer. The lyrics of Gary Jules’ song are an ambiguous addition to the images of the trailer. On one hand, audiences can read the song as a pessimistic acceptance of video games as a place to “drown...sorrow.” In this reading, video games become a “mad world” where death is one’s only comfort. On the other hand, audiences can read the song ironically, as a validation of violent games in the first place. Here, the video game is idealized as a “dream in which [players are] dying,” even as it promises to be “the best [dream/video game experience they’ve] ever had.” Both readings are legitimate. What sets each apart is how audiences choose to fill in the enthymematic blank. To an audience familiar with video games, death is part of game play. To an audience unfamiliar with video
games – or perhaps to an audience familiar with games, but acutely aware of media
effects – death is dark and distressing.

This same sense of flexibility lies within the *Halo* “Museum” trailer. Visually, the
trailer presents an austere and pious scene. The protagonist is an emotional war
veteran. The museum is a monument to the dead. The diorama presents the dead, the
dying, and the injured in minute detail. The scene is one of real world conflict.
Through an economic reading, this scene becomes overbearing, morally compelling
audiences to buy *Halo 3*. However, we can read against this grain. While the scene of
the “Museum” is austere, it is also celebratory. Though the “Museum” trailer depicts a
severe future, that future promises to be immensely valuable and rewarding; play this
game, the trailer implies, and museums will be built to memorialize you.
Documentaries will be made about you. Soldiers will spend their lives remembering
you. With a slight change in agency – in the reader’s choice of interpretation – the
trailer is no longer domineering, but rather utopian.

Finally, even the *World of Warcraft* trailers are flexible texts subject to
contextualized readings. For an audience not frequently associated with video games,
Mr. T and William Shatner represent familiar faces. They are familiar, both as B.A.
Baracus and Captain James T. Kirk, but also as people who stereotypically have no
business playing *World of Warcraft*. If Shatner and Mr. T can play, the argument goes, so
can you. However, for an audience who regularly plays games, the appeal of the trailer is subtly different. To gamers, Mr. T and William Shatner also represent people who have no business playing *World of Warcraft*, but instead of saying, “If they can play, so can you,” the trailer seems to say, “They should *not* be playing; you should.” The humor of the trailer is the same for both groups; however, each audience reacts to the text in a different way.

Because of this flexibility, we must theorize a trailer rhetoric that is intimately tied to audience agency. As Kernan notes, “trailers are texts *and* contexts, and need to be addressed in ways that acknowledge” their status as both. There will always be multiple ways to fill in the enthymematic breaks. One cannot read trailers solely through the narrative of economics, nor can one read trailers solely through the narratives of play. Looking at trailers in a broader context, we must recognize that different audiences use different scripts – different literacies – to read media messages. Not all audiences have the same knowledge. Not all audiences recognize the social practices, the cinematic conventions, or the video game tropes at work in video game trailers. In looking at how audiences approach trailers, we must recognize what knowledge each audience has, and how that knowledge will guide them across enthymematic gaps. I take up this problem in the next chapter, looking at how different
groups approach specific trailers through James Paul Gee’s framework of multimodal literacy.
When Literacies Compete:
Reading, Writing and a Video Game Trailer

On March 1st, 2007 the website www.gtaiv.com went live. The site showed a black background with the roman numerals “IV” in large white relief. Below the numerals was the word “Trailer,” hovering above a digital clock that counted down the days, hours, minutes and seconds until March 29th.

As a fan of Grand Theft Auto, I spent fifteen minutes on March 29th waiting for the countdown to reach 00:00:00:00. When the moment finally arrived, the website froze. I tried multiple computers, but the site refused to open. I checked message boards on gaming websites and found that I was not alone. The mass influx of viewers crippled the site within seconds. I furiously hit “refresh” hoping that the trailer would miraculously appear on my screen – a strategy I am sure did nothing to relieve the problem of overwhelming web-traffic.

Three hours later, I finally watched the Grand Theft Auto IV trailer. The trailer featured gorgeous images of a virtual New York City, complete with a mock Statue of Liberty, Chrysler building, and Coney Island. After almost a minute of these cityscapes, the trailer ended on the image of a rough looking, eastern-European male, who mused, “I’ve killed people...Smuggled people...Sold people...Maybe here, things will be different” (Rockstar Games).
Two days after the trailer’s online debut, the Mayor of New York City offered an official response to the trailer. A spokesman for Mayor Bloomberg told reporters that “The mayor does not support any video game where you earn points for injuring or killing police officers.” Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly added, “It’s despicable to glamorize violence in games like these, regardless of how far-fetched the setting may be.” And City Councilman Peter Vallone, the chairman of the Public Safety Committee, commented that “Setting Grand Theft Auto in the safest big city in America would be like setting Halo in Disneyland” (Pereira et al. 2007).

As the Internet caught wind of these comments, online video game communities were incensed. Many posters accused Bloomberg of a double standard: “how many movies with murders or horrible disasters take place in NYC? And those crews (and the tax dollars they bring in) are welcomed” (Śliwiński). Other posters criticized the media for a biased portrayal of the game. In response to a New York Daily news article that claimed “players advanced through the game by killing cops, selling pornography to children and killing prostitutes,” one poster responded “there are no children in the game at all, right? i hate when the media just makes up shit” (Digg).

Despite the general disdain for Mayor Bloomberg’s comments, some members of the gaming community tried to give context to Bloomberg’s response. As one poster writes, “All these city politicians are worried about is tourism, and so they’ll attack
something which they think casts a pall over NYC’s reputation. “The poster reasoned that “the lawlessness that is at the core of the GTA series means you can’t expect them [the Mayor and his cabinet] to not say anything, especially considering the big PR campaign [for the game]” (NYC Politicos Get Panties in a Twist Over GTA IV Trailer).

This last post in particular, and the juxtaposition of Bloomberg’s cabinet with online game forums in general, demonstrates how audiences approach multimodal texts through multiple literacies. Different audiences read game trailers with different strategies. While game players read the Grand Theft Auto trailer as a promise of a new game and as a continuation of past experience, neither of these readings aligns with the interpretation of city politicians like Bloomberg. Even within a single community it is possible for multiple readings to emerge. Game players can contextualize Bloomberg’s official statements while also resisting his reading of the trailer; Councilman Vallone can criticize GTA while also demonstrating knowledge of the video games through his metaphor of “Halo in Disneyland.”

We can reconcile the various readings of multimodal texts by looking at the social practices that support literacy. Perhaps New York City politicians are poor readers of video game trailers. Or perhaps, as some online posts suggest, politicians are excellent readers who simply read with a different community in mind. Following the model of James Paul Gee, I argue that literacy is inherently social. In this light, the
multiple and conflicting readings of video game trailers represent the multiple and conflicting communities invested in those trailers. These communities, called “affinity groups” by Gee, shape unique literacies through their ongoing social interaction around video game trailers.

**A Multimodal Literacy**

In his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us about Learning and Literacy*, James Paul Gee applies principles drawn from social linguistics research to thinking about video games and game players. Gee argues that video games encourage players to learn complex literacies – to master the “semiotic domains” of complex signifying systems and rule sets – in order to become successful game players. Players must literally learn in order to play. The best games, Gee observes, are frequently those that best teach. After all, few people enjoy obtuse and frustrating games. Players feel empowered by games that build mastery and fluency through game play. By mastering the semiotic domains of these games, players achieve literacy.

Gee defines literacy in several stages. Most importantly, literacy is *contextual*. As Gee writes, “When you read, you are always reading something in some way” (Gee 2003:1). There is no such thing as reading in the abstract: Rather, reading is always a situated act. One can read a variety of things (a book, a billboard, the Bible) in a variety of ways (as a parent, as a student, as a linguist, as a historian), each with distinct
processes and outcomes. In this regard, Gee builds upon Havelock and Ong’s argument for literacy as a tool or technology that is always applied in some particular way. Gee uses the Bible as an example: one reads the Bible quite differently as a historical document than as divine revelation. One reads the Bible differently as an account of the Roman Empire than as an ethnographic study of early Christianity. Each way of reading emphasizes certain details and reflects a particular literacy with which to approach a text.

Gee explains these varied readings in terms of a multiple, or multimodal, literacy. Like Lankshear, Street and other New Literacy scholars, Gee does not limit literacy to conventional technologies of reading and writing. Rather, Gee argues that literacy applies equally to written modes of communication, as to visual modes, or aural modes, or anything between. “In the modern world,” Gee writes, “language is not the only important communicational system” (Gee 2003:13). Rather, we communicate through a variety of signification systems that draw upon multiple literacies. In order to understand TV commercials, for example, one must recognize (read) several interrelated modes of address: advertising tropes, brand imagery, brand history, cinematic rhetoric. Each of these modes has its own literacy. As Gee writes,

“There are many different ways of reading and writing. We don’t read or write newspapers, legal tracts, essays in literary criticism, poetry, rap songs, and on through a nearly endless list in the same way. Each of these domains has its own rules and requirements. Each is a culturally and
historically separate way of reading and writing, and, in that sense, a different literacy” (Gee 2003:14).

TV commercials require a culturally and historically specific literacy which is distinct from the culturally and historically specific literacy of advertising in general, which is itself different from the literacy of magazine advertisements or highway billboards.

As a linguist, Gee explains these multiple modes in terms of semiotic domains. Semiotic domains are understood as “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (Gee 2003). TV commercials are a semiotic domain. TV commercials communicate distinctive meanings to audiences about why to buy certain products from certain vendors. In fact, every item on Gee’s list of “newspapers, legal tracts, essays in literary criticism, poetry, [and] rap songs” represents a separate semiotic domain. Each realm communicates unique meanings grounded in unique social practices. There is a recognizable “way to talk” about newspapers and a way to talk within newspapers, both of which differ from the way to talk about rap songs and the way to talk within rap songs. This flexibility is furthered by social groups: Fans of rap music read the semiotic domain of rap differently than literary critics; literary critics, commensurately, approach rap songs and newspaper articles differently than lawyers or journalists.
It is this plurality of semiotic domains that makes literacy a multimodal and flexible affair. Literacy always reflects a specific semiotic domain. Gee reminds us that, “we always learn something. And that something is always connected, in some way, to some semiotic domain or other” (Gee 2003). We can read the Bible as a historical document or as divine revelation. We can read the Bible as sociologists or as ethnographers. However, each reading derives from a specific semiotic domain: the domain of historical research, of religious doctrine, of academic discipline. Each domain, in turn, gives rise to a particular literacy. The domain of ethnography inscribes different meanings to the Bible’s list of names and geographic locations than the domain of church doctrine.

Because of this variety, multimodal texts represent significant challenge to the reader. These texts support a plurality of readings because they address audiences across multiple semiotic domains. Each of these domains, each of these modes of communication, has its own literacy. Together, this plurality of literacy complicates new texts; “the combination of the two modes communicates things that neither of the modes does separately” (Gee 2003:14). In other words, audiences who recognize more domains often find more – or at least distinct – meanings. Audiences fluent in the domain of movie trailers, summer blockbusters, and Hollywood films will read a trailer differently than an audience fluent in none of the above. Literacy is not only the ability
to read and write in a single domain, but rather to recognize how multiple domains overlap to support novel means of reading and writing.

As a result of this multiplicity of semiotic domains, *literacies change*. As Gee writes, semiotic domains are “primarily a lived and historically changing set of distinctive social practices” (Gee 2003:21). Literacy is not a list of rules, despite grammar schools’ best arguments to the contrary. Instead, literacy is a social practice that changes and evolves with the society around it. A semiotic domain changes as its internal and external surfaces interact. The internal semiotic domain—the meanings of words and images—reflects the external domain of “real people and their social interactions” (Gee 2003). Gee explains this relationship between internal and external domains with the example of basketball. The internal domain of basketballs, basketball courts and basketball players reflects the social interactions of the external domain of the NBA, of sportswriters, basketball players, and basketball fans. In this example, the external domain of basketball can change what it means to be basketball-literate. In other words, the NBA, sportswriters and fans can change the meanings of things like basketballs, courts, and players. For example, the external domain of the NBA has changed the meaning of a 3-point shot in basketball by not only introducing the shot in 1979, but by continually changing the distance from which a field goal is considered a 3-point shot.
Gee labels these external groups as *affinity groups*. Affinity groups are the stakeholders of a semiotic domain. They are groups of people who care about a domain and the meanings within it. The NBA, the National Basketball Referees Association, ESPN, and basketball fans would all represent affinity groups within the domain of basketball. Although “they may not see many people in the group face-to-face, … when they interact with someone on the Internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing as more or less typical of people who are ‘into’ the semiotic domain” (Gee 2003:27). Affinity groups are the social systems of literacy. They are the means by which individuals approach something in some way.

Gee describes this relationship between domains and affinity groups in terms of *design space*. The design space of a semiotic domain is simply the rules that classify what is acceptable within the domain. Prior to 1979, the 3-point shot was not within the design space of NBA basketball. After 1979 it was. Affinity groups change semiotic domains by rewriting design space. Affinity groups challenge what counts in a given semiotic domain.

Literacy is usefully understood as the ability to recognize and manipulate design space. Although this notion of literacy is similar to the earlier concept of “reading and writing something in some way,” it is more flexible still: When we view literacy as the
knowledge of design space, then literacy becomes a situated, social process in which meanings are tied to specific groups at specific points in time. Even more important, therefore, is the conclusion that all reading is ideological. As Gee thoughtfully notes, “semiotic domains are inherently political” (Gee 2003:44). Semiotic domains are biased; they prioritize certain readings and mask certain assumptions. This is not to say that one domain is inherently better than another, but rather some domains will offer wildly different interpretations of the same material. Different domains encourage different literacies.

**Who is Literate in Video Game Trailers?**

We can frame video game trailers in terms of Gee’s multimodal literacies. Video game trailers like the *GTA IV* trailer are multimodal texts: Trailers appeal to audiences through multiple modes of communication, while audiences read trailers across multiple semiotic domains. Trailers approach audiences through recurring tropes, advertising rhetoric, cinematic conventions among others. Audiences read these multiple domains through various affinity groups. One can read trailers as a game player or a game buyer, as a concerned parent or as a city politician. Each of these supports a unique literacy with regard to video games. In looking at competing readings, therefore, we will not discriminate in terms of better or worse readings. Instead, following Gee, we can contextualize each reading within affinity groups. The
goal, therefore, is not to establish a hierarchy of literacies, but to shed light on the social processes that encourage or require individuals to privilege certain readings over others.

Trailers in general, and video game trailers in particular, address audiences through multiple modes. As Kernan observes, audiences read trailers not only as audiovisual texts, but also through “a body of social knowledge...plus a body of specific cinematic conventions, a body of expectations about what films can offer narratively” (Kernan 2004:9). Video game trailers make themselves available to audiences through each of Kernan’s modes, as well as through specific video game conventions. Just as one can “read the Bible as history or literature or as a self-help guide,” one can read video game trailers through film conventions, trailer rhetoric, and video game knowledge.

The “Starry Night” trailer demonstrates these multiple modes of trailer literacy. The Halo trailer consists of “all sorts of different things that can take on meanings, such as images, sounds, gestures, movements, graphs, diagrams, equations, objects, even people” (Gee 2003:17). In terms of film conventions, for example, the “Starry Night” trailer features Classical Hollywood editing with eye-line matches and reverse shots. Audiences familiar with the domain of Classical Hollywood editing recognize that the two children in the “Starry Night” trailer are in dialogue with each other and that their
dialogue parallels the later battle between Master Chief and the alien soldiers. In terms of trailer rhetoric, audiences can also read the trailer through enthymeme, filling in the argument between the visual presentation of the *Halo* universe and the real–world decision to buy the *Halo* game. Finally, the “Starry Night” trailer addresses audiences through the domain of *Halo* itself. In other words, *Halo* players can discern distinct signs within the “Starry Night” trailer that other audiences cannot. The figure of Master Chief, the meticulous placement of his weapons, and the use of a transparent “bubble shield,” are meaningful to game players, and yet somewhat meaningless to non-players.

Game trailer literacy, therefore, becomes a question of competence within the multiple domains of video game trailers. An audience is literate in video game trailers, “if they can recognize and/or produce distinctive types of meanings” within the domain of video game trailers: If they can recognize and interpret Classical Hollywood editing, enthymematic appeals, and video-game minutiae in the “Starry Night” trailer, they are literate (Gee 2003).

These multiple readings reflect the multiple affinity groups invested in trailer literacy. Both film audiences and gaming audiences are affinity groups that read trailers through different lenses. Along with the film audiences and game players, the video game industry is another affinity group concerned with trailer literacy. Game
developers and distributors depend on audiences to not only read trailers, but to act on those readings. Software companies want audiences to buy their games and hardware companies want audiences to buy any game on their system. However, game makers and game players are not the only audience for game trailers. Looking back to the Grand Theft Auto IV trailer, it is apparent that other affinity groups often have vested interests in the meanings of game trailers; politicians and media outlets are another community that contests trailer literacy.

In order to narrow our search, we can look specifically at online affinity groups for video game trailers. While there are no official statistics on game trailer releases, the blogs, wikis, newsgroups, listservs and fan pages built and supported by online audiences provide substantial and compelling evidence as to game trailers’ effect. More than a medium for content delivery, audiences use the Internet to debate and discuss video game trailers. Websites like GameTrailers.com and GameVideos.com suggest a sizable investment, both in terms of human capital and the data infrastructure, supporting online trailers. Websites like Penny-Arcade, IGN, and even Digg act as venues for affinity groups who “work, through their various social practices, to encourage people to read and think in certain ways, and not others, about certain sorts of texts and things” (Gee 2003:2). In this spirit, gaming websites commonly feature “deconstructions” of the latest trailers, often including sophisticated frame-by-frame
analysis. Similarly, website users log onto virtual accounts to offer their own readings of specific trailers. While these online groups are anonymous and often mobile, they are nonetheless invested in the semiotic domain of video game trailers. These users “may not see many people in the group face-to-face, but when they interact with someone on the Internet or read something about the domain, they can recognize certain ways of thinking, acting, interacting, valuing, and believing as more or less typical of people who are ‘into’ the semiotic domain” (Gee 2003:27).

Nonetheless, online affinity groups pose problems. In particular, online communication comprises both a means of interacting as well as the interaction itself. Websites are both a forum for discussion and a source of discussion. Adding to Gee’s framework, we can contrast these two facets in terms of top-down and bottom-up affinity groups. From a top-down perspective, the websites themselves are institutions that “encourage people to read and think in certain ways, and not others, about certain” trailers. These affinity groups encourage specific reading practices – specific literacies – by regulating the forum of discussion. As institutions, websites choose to feature certain content on their site, to publish specific articles on specific games. On the other hand, from the bottom-up, users of these websites represent another affinity group. User communities are bottom-up affinity groups that do not regulate the framework for discussion, but instead shape discussion itself. Users encourage specific readings
through their own discussion and debate. Often, these top-down and bottom-up affinity groups promote similar literacies: to repeat Gee, “semiotic domains and affinity groups often don’t have sharp boundaries...and in any case the boundaries are often fluid and changing” (Gee 2003:21). Nonetheless, through this distinction of top-down and bottom-up affinity groups, we can examine how different groups use different strategies to encourage their own readings of video game trailers.

Top-down Affinity Groups: Website Administrators, Online Institutions

Online institutions act as top-down affinity groups. More specifically, parent companies, website administrators, and forum moderators represent an affinity group that regulates meanings within semiotic domains by controlling the means of communication. Parent companies deliberately decide what a website will and (more importantly) will not display. Website administrators privilege certain content on their site while rejecting alternate opinions. Forum moderators literally censor conversation itself, banning users who are deemed inappropriate. Each of these strategies shapes how audiences read video game trailers. Moreover, each of these strategies flows downward from the website administrators to its users. The website-as-institution regulates content from above in order shape both the domain of video game trailers and the readings of other affinity groups in that domain.
We can see top-down affinity groups at work in the case of *Resident Evil 5 (RE5)* with the unexpected injection of Race into its trailer, which caused a stir amongst gaming communities and non-gaming communities alike. *Resident Evil* is a video game franchise in which video game players must solve intricate environment-based puzzles while fighting off mobs of infected zombies. Following the success of the original *Resident Evil* in 1996, the franchise has since grown to over 15 different games and 3 motion pictures. The *RE5* trailer stands apart from its predecessors because it was the first to include dark-skinned zombies juxtaposed with a white skinned protagonist. Although previous *Resident Evil* titles did include a small number of African-American zombies, the games depicted the majority of “infected” as Caucasian Americans, or, in the case of RE4, Caucasian Spanish villagers.

The *RE5* trailer debuted in early June, 2007. By month’s end, several online news outlets responded to the trailer’s controversial images. On June 30th the popular alternative news site VillageVoice.com posted an article entitled, “Resident Evil 5: White Man Shoots Black Zombies.” The article questioned the appropriateness and the meanings behind the *RE5* trailer, calling on everything from race wars to miscegenation to HIV infection (Ruberg 2007). The next day BlackLooks.com, a community weblog dedicated to “African Women [and] the African Diaspora that is socially, politically, racially, culturally, ethnically and sexually diverse,” posted a reply to the VillageVoice
article. Kym Platt, a regular BlackLooks author posted a brief description of the trailer, along with a sharp critique:

This is problematic on so many levels, including the depiction of Black people as inhuman savages, the killing of Black people by a white man in military clothing, and the fact that this video game is marketed to children and young adults. Start them young... fearing, hating, and destroying Black people (Platt 2007).

Platt categorizes her article under the tags “Racism” and “Africa,” and within hours had several visitors responding to both. In less than 24 hours more than 131 users commented on the blog entry. The majority of comments opposed Platt’s reading of the Resident Evil franchise. By 4pm on August 1st, comments on Platt’s blog were officially closed (Platt 2007).

It is important to restate that for purposes of this project, I will be looking specifically at affinity groups. Neither the validity nor the political correctness of Platt and her critics is at stake. Although the RE5 trailer invokes a deep and delicate discussion of race and representation, that discussion will not be addressed here. Instead, I will use the case of RE5 to look at how two distinct affinity groups work to promote their own literacies and their own readings with regard to this specific trailer.

This intervention by administrators on the BlackLooks site is one example of how online affinity groups can regulate a semiotic domain from the top-down. When Platt’s blog was bombarded with replies, the institution of BlackLooks regulated users by
officially closing off feedback. In closing feedback, BlackLooks engaged in a social practice that encouraged certain readings of the RE5 trailer while renouncing others. Website administrators deliberately controlled the discourse and the domain available to users. This deployment of top-down regulation validated a very specific reading of the trailer, a specific design space. Because the majority of responses to Platt’s blog were inflammatory critiques, we can read her actions, or rather the actions of the affinity group BlackLooks, as a rejection of opposing readings and a reiteration of her own literacy; Platt silenced her critics.

Top-down affinity groups also normalize their readings of video game trailers by regulating content on their websites. After BlackLooks had closed comments on Platt’s article, Platt updated and edited her original blog, offering a link to another discussion of the RE5 trailer. By updating her original post, Platt continued her own discussion of the semiotic domain. However, because this freedom to continue discourse was unavailable to other users, we can read it as a top-down regulation, as another tool to privilege certain readings. Through persistent updates, website administrators normalize their own readings of a domain and downplay their detractors. In fact, the very power to author may be read as a top-down strategy of affinity groups. Both Platt’s blog and the blog to which she refers, Microscopiq’s “Blackface goes HD”, validate specific readings of the RE5 trailer because the blogs are top-down authorities. A blog
very literally flows top-down. Users know that the top of a page is reserved for the authoritative voice, while the bottom is left to “lay” discourse. Consequently, the act of authoring becomes a regulation of legitimate readings; the word of the author is given primacy over all other discourse on the semiotic domain.

Top-down affinity groups revise what it means to be literate in a semiotic domain. In each of the above examples, online institutions function as affinity groups, as social networks that shape the internal domain of game trailers. Together these affinity groups contest meanings through top-down regulation. Authorship, content control, and web-linking are social practices that promote certain trailer readings while denouncing others. In promoting only certain readings as acceptable or valid, these affinity groups redefine what it means to be trailer literate. Literacy is recognition and decoding of a semiotic domain. Top-down affinity groups transform literacy by transforming the semiotic domain itself, by moving the boundaries of design space, of what is and is not legitimate content in the domain.

**Bottom-Up Affinity Groups**

Not all affinity groups interact with a semiotic domain from the top-down. Rather, because most affinity groups do not have institutional power or bureaucratic authority, most affinity groups emerge from the bottom up. Just as top-down groups encourage particular readings within a semiotic domain from above, these grassroots
affinity groups encourage readings from below. Moreover, because these groups are emergent, they are often more mobile and diverse than their top-down counterparts. Particularly in online spaces, these bottom-up affinity groups represent a nebulous network of itinerant and anonymous users who move freely among multiple affinity groups. Consequently, bottom-up affinity groups are more often interrelated and interpenetrated than their top-down counterparts.

In terms of video game trailers and online spaces, bottom-up affinity groups materialize through the repeated act of commenting on online forums. Groups of users who agree on certain topics slowly coalesce into affinity groups, into communities who “recognize others as more or less ‘insiders’ to the group” (Gee 2003). These affinity groups, in turn, work through online forums and websites to normalize their own readings of a semiotic domain. Just as website administrators regulate communities from above, these communities often regulate readings from below. Through online debate – which often devolves into mockery and abuse – these ad hoc user groups challenge the literacy of both top-down authorities and other community affinity groups.

As with top-down affinity groups, we see this bottom-up strategy in the very architecture of online spaces. As mentioned, a website is physically oriented with the voice of authority at the top and community at the bottom. Communities debate the
bottom-up affinity groups lack the luxury of complete control over content, the tone of bottom-up discussions is quite different from the tone of top-down regulation. User groups can rarely censor other comments or reframe an entire debate in the way website administrators are free to do. Instead, the “social practices” of bottom-up affinity groups consists of repetitive and stochastic outbursts. What bottom-up affinity groups lack in institutional power, they make up for in noise. User communities become affinity groups by establishing a recurring message.

On both the BlackLooks and Microscopiq sites, communities use repetition to contest Platt’s reading of the RE5 trailer. For example, one affinity group characterizes itself by repeatedly emphasizing that games have history. Posters from this affinity group repeatedly assert their own identity as game players. As gamers, these groups emphasize that games like RE5 are part of a larger history. Microscopiq poster Slython demonstrates this recurring argument through his post:

Resident Evil 1 - white people are zombies
Resident Evil 2 - white people are zombies
Resident Evil 3: Nemesis - white people are zombies
Resident Evil Code: Veronica - white people are zombies
Resident Evil Survivor - white people are zombies
Resident Evil Gaiden - white people are zombies
Resident Evil: Survivor 2 Code: Veronica - white people are zombies
Resident Evil Zero - white people are zombies
Resident Evil: Dead Aim - white people are zombies
Resident Evil Outbreak - white people are zombies
Though Slython may belabor the point, his post reflects a larger set of comments, all of which criticize Platt for her oversight. These posts become a standard through which to evaluate other comments as more or less legitimate. By my own count, 39 of the 131 responses to Platt’s article refer to either the history of the Resident Evil franchise or the history of gaming in general. These 39 posts represent an affinity group in which repetition serves as a social practice to normalize and legitimate specific readings.

While user discussion is always a step below the website administrator and the website author, user discussion nonetheless contests and confronts top-down regulation through community action.

We see this contrast between top-down and bottom-up affinity groups when top-down voices participate in bottom-up debate. When Platt moves from blog author to community poster her “voice” changes. As an author Platt is above the community. Her comments and her choice of content frames the entire debate. However, once Platt contributes to the string of user comments she becomes indistinguishable from other anonymous posters; her interpretation is challenged and ridiculed like any other. The
power of a byline is diminished when it embeds itself in a recurring chain of online pseudonyms like “Gamer_137,” “nullskill,” and “roboninja.”

While this process may seem vague in the example of BlackLooks, a more tangible bottom-up affinity group exists in user-based ranking systems. The website Digg, in particular, institutionalizes bottom-up affinity groups through community “digging”. Each user comment can be dugg up (recommended) or dugg down (disparaged) by other members of the community. Eventually, comments that have been dugg down by a sufficient number of users will be physically diminished, and hidden behind the phrase, “[below viewing threshold].” User rankings offer bottom-up communities the power of top-down institutional authorities. Digg encourages users to form affinity groups and to very directly regulate readings within semiotic domains. Posts with the most “diggs” become emblems of the user affinity group. Posts with negative “diggs” represent opinions and readings of which affinity groups disapproves.

On a Digg page covering the RE5 controversy, the first comment dugg down is simply the sentence, “it’s a difficult topic” (Digg). For this Digg affinity group, the trailer’s racial imagery is apparently not a difficult topic. Instead, the community enforces a different reading. With 301 positive diggs, the first comment on the page reads: “The author of the blog [Ms. Platt] responded to one of the commenters, ‘Yes... I am more comfortable with the zombies being white. In fact, ALL zombies should be
white from this day forth.’ Who the hell is the racist here??” By digging up this comment, the Digg affinity group normalizes this reading of video game trailers. The website’s architecture allows affinity groups to visually “recognize what is and what is not acceptable or typical content in a semiotic domain” (Gee 2003:30). User comments become a strategy for enforcing literacy practices.

**Social Value**

Affinity groups affect semiotic domains from above and below. Top-down affinity groups use institutional authority to normalize certain readings within the design space of a semiotic domain. Website administrators and other authorial voices offer a distinct reading of video game trailers. Their readings prioritize certain meanings by highlighting particular content and censoring other content. Similarly, bottom-up communities encourage readings through interpretative regulation. Bottom-up groups contest top-down authority through a process of repetition. Communities like Digg make this regulation transparent; user groups support some opinions and mock others. Moreover, as top-down and bottom-up communities interact, these affinity groups continually reframe literacy. The domain itself is transformed by the social practices of affinity groups. Affinity groups challenge what is acceptable both within the domain and without; affinity groups challenge how audiences read and write meanings within a domain.
Using Gees framework, we can look back on the original *Grand Theft Auto IV* trailer with new eyes. Initially, it was difficult to tell if Bloomberg was a poor reader of video games or a sophisticated reader of city politics. Gaming communities argued the former. However, through Gee’s framework of multimodal literacies, neither Mayor Bloomberg nor video game fans offer a better reading of the official trailer. Instead, both readings represent the work of distinct affinity groups. Gamer websites reflect an affinity group invested in the social practice of playing and talking about video games. Bloomberg and his cabinet reflect an affinity group invested in the social practices of managing millions of citizens, reducing crime rates, and bringing in tourism.

The history of the *Grand Theft Auto* franchise sheds light on these competing affinity groups. In terms of mainstream politics, *GTA* has a troubled history. The title of the franchise hints at its controversy. Playing *GTA* involves, among other things, car-jacking, prostitution, and murder. The games are remorselessly violent. And, while the franchise contextualizes this violence with larger narrative and moral arcs and with humorous self-reflexivity, the series is nonetheless marked in public consciousness by its gross immorality. Jack Thompson, a lawyer known for his distaste of video game violence, publicly declared the franchise a “murder simulator.” On several occasions, Thompson has testified in court to the pathological nature of violent games on children and young adults (Haines). Similarly, Senators Hillary Rodham Clinton and Joe
Lieberman have publicly critiqued the GTA franchise. When players uncovered hidden sexual content in Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas, Senators Clinton and Lieberman promptly and publicly responded. The senators used GTA as a springboard to introduce their newly crafted Family Entertainment Protection Act – a federal measure to prevent the sale of mature games to minors (The Office of Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton).

It is interesting to note that the illicit content in GTA: SA was only accessible when players deliberately modified the original computer code of the game. No illicit material appeared in the standard game. Rather, users actively uncovered the material through third-party actions. Nonetheless, GTA: SA was taken off store shelves and re-rated from its original Mature (18 years and older) to A/O (adults only). A/O is the video game equivalent of NC-17 or even X – a rating that all but prohibits public advertising and distribution through mainstream stores.

This brief history lends credence to Bloomberg’s reading of the GTA IV trailer. As a political figure, Bloomberg represents an affinity group that has long criticized GTA as the paradigm of violent video games. Whereas gamers read the GTA IV trailer in terms of their past experiences playing GTA games, Bloomberg reads the GTA IV trailer in terms of a longstanding mistrust of media representations. Each affinity group reads the GTA IV trailer through its own literacy. However, both affinity groups care
about the literacy of video game trailers. Both Bloomberg and game fans take trailers seriously; both take the time to reflect on how we read video game trailers.
Soon after Mayor Bloomberg publicly denounced the *Grand Theft Auto IV* (*GTA IV*) trailer, fan communities began producing their own trailers for the upcoming series. Using the official trailer as inspiration, fans re-edited and re-scored the original footage into personal productions. Some fan-made trailers changed just an image or two. Others completely reworked the original. The result was a burst of user-generated content whose rhetoric challenged the conventional literacy behind Bloomberg’s comments.

Two particularly argumentative fan-made trailers both imitate the official *GTA IV* trailer in other media. YouTube user All3n05 recreates the original *GTA IV* trailer with live-action video. In terms of shots, scenes, and editing, All3n05’s video is identical to the official trailer produced by Rockstar Games. However, where the official trailer features digital environments and video game characters, All3n05’s trailer features stock footage of real human beings and real New York street scenes. In fact, All3n05’s trailer features only live-action clips scavenged from other YouTube movies ("My GTA IV Spoof"). Similarly, a user named “Brotha” recreates the original *GTA IV* trailer within another video game. Just as All3n05 reshoots the original trailer in live action,
“Brotha” reshoots the original trailer with avatars and in-game graphics from a previous game in the GTA series.

Reconciling these fan-made trailers with mainstream voices like Bloomberg is a difficult task. As I argued in the previous chapter, one strategy for reconciling competing readings is to look at affinity groups. However, by prioritizing affinity groups alone, we risk missing the forest for the trees. If scholars are right when they suggest that distinct literacies produce distinct ways of thinking, then gamers’ literacy should not end with complaints on bulletin boards. While literacies do emerge from social practice, literacies also effect social change. Readings are political.

Although neither fan-made trailer addresses itself to Mayor Bloomberg, we can read All3n05 and Brotha’s trailers as counterpoints to Bloomberg’s official statements. Both trailers offer compelling critiques of Bloomberg’s reading of the official GTA IV teaser trailer. All3n05 takes up a line of argument often voiced in video game forums: Why does Bloomberg publicly decry a video game trailer while simultaneously ignoring movie trailers that depict New York City in problematic ways? All3n05’s parody of the official trailer satirizes this argument by transmuting the game trailer into a film trailer. Similarly, Brotha’s trailer articulates a problem we mentioned briefly in the introduction to this project: namely, the gap between experience and critique of new media. Brotha highlights Bloomberg’s outsider status by offering a competing reading
of the GTA franchise that is grounded in playing the game. Instead of focusing on the violence of Grand Theft Auto, Brotha demonstrates the creative freedom that the game allows. By playing an old GTA game in order to make a new fan-made trailer, Brotha not only critiques Bloomberg’s reading and Bloomberg’s literacy, but Brotha also demonstrates his own fluency as a game player and digital producer.

This conflict between Bloomberg’s reading and fan-made trailers is a conflict over representation. Bloomberg criticizes the GTA IV trailer for its representation of New York City. Like Plato in The Republic, Bloomberg fears the destructive power of imaginative imitation. And yet it is precisely this power of representation that fan-made trailers celebrate. Fan-made trailers capitalize on the malleability of digital media, deliberately manipulating texts into imaginative representations. Following the work of Henry Jenkins, I argue that these fan-made trailers resist the traditional literacies of figures like Bloomberg. Instead, fan trailers encourage a ludic literacy wherein conventional literacy strategies are frustrated via playful performances.

**Techné and Politeia**

Although we tend to think of media and technology as distinct terrains, media and technology overlap. As Marshall McLuhan suggests, media itself is a technology. Technology is not limited to electronic tools and gadgets; rather, as scholars like
Langdon Winner argue, technology represents a larger frame of social activities with political implications.

Winner defines technology in three ways: as artifact, as technique, and as social practice. When we think of technology in everyday terms, we tend to think of artifacts: we think of DVD players, video game consoles, microprocessors, etc. However, these artifacts depend on technique, on know-how. Artifacts in and of themselves are rather uninteresting. A DVD player is useless without the knowledge necessary to use it; technique gives technology a function. And as society develops techniques around an artifact, the artifact becomes entwined in social practices. Automobiles, for instance, begin as an artifact – as a machine or as a prototype. As engineers interact with the prototype, they begin to develop technique and know-how. They acquire the knowledge necessary to drive a car, to repair the engine, to change a tire, etc. Over time, these techniques become social institutions. “Driving” becomes a way of life. Roads transform rural and city life. Suburbs emerge. Family structure changes. Technology becomes a confluence of the artifact, know-how, and social practice (Winner 1986).

With this in mind, Winner argues that technologies are political. They are not “merely aids to human activity, but also powerful forces acting to reshape that activity and its meaning” (Winner 1986:6). The automobile does not merely aid human beings in
transportation; it reshapes what transportation means, how societies are organized, how individuals experience the world around them. The automobile is political. It embodies “specific forms of power and authority,” as almost all people who rely on public transportation are well aware (Winner 1986:19).

Because it ignores these social consequences, the strict notion of technology-as-artifact is often naïve. When technologies are social, “a strictly instrumental/functional understanding fails us badly” (Winner 1986:6). As Winner notes, we can understand every detail about the artifact of the automobile without understanding its importance to our culture. We can master the technique of driving, of maintenance and car-care, and yet still remain ignorant of the political consequences of an automobile society. What we need instead is an awareness of the social practice and the lived experience of technology.

Academics take up this question of social practice in fields like the Social Construction of Technology (SCT). These academics theorize technology as a series of steps or stages. They argue that technology does not emerge fully grown; rather, it develops through time. During each stage of development, a technology changes to meet new demands and new challenges. Two SCT scholars, W.E. Bijker and Thomas Hughes, explain this process of technological development with the example of the bicycle. As a technology, the bicycle did not begin in its modern day form. Rather the
bicycle evolved as different social groups adapted the artifact to different social practices. For instance, some groups viewed the bicycle as a dangerous, thrilling pastime. Consequently speed was of the utmost importance. Safety was not. This group favored a bicycle with one large front tire and a smaller back tire for increased speed. However, other groups viewed the bicycle as a means of transportation. For this group, safety was crucial. They favored a low-wheeled bicycle with two evenly sized wheels.

Bijker and Hughes outline how each of these groups transformed the technology of the bicycle with regard to air-pressure tires. For transportation-based riders, the air-pressure tire solved a problem of vibration; “However, the group of sporting cyclists riding their high-wheelers did not accept that as a problem at all.” When, for instance, the air tire “was used at the racing track, its entry was hailed with derisive laughter. This was, however, quickly silenced by the high speed achieved, and soon there was only astonishment left when it outpaced all rivals...After a short period no racer of any pretensions troubled to compete on anything else” (Bijker et al. 1989:45,46). Here, Bijker and Hughes’ emphasize Winner’s point: a functional approach fails badly in terms of social construction. The functional definition of a bicycle depends on the interplay of two distinct social groups—the technology develops in response to the push-and-pull of different groups with varied interests.
This competition between social groups introduces technology to politics. To quote Winner, this “social activity [or social construction] is an ongoing process of world-making” (Winner 1986:17). When social groups transform technologies like the bicycle or automobile, those social groups also transform the lives of people who use bicycles and automobiles. Had social groups acted differently, different realities could emerge. Had social groups imagined the automobile in terms of fuel efficiency rather than engine horsepower, our society and our lives would be different. Social groups transform both the technology and the possibilities that technology affords.

Ultimately, literacy is technology. Literacy is the process through which social groups shape technology and through which technology shapes those groups. As Winner writes, when we “[choose] our terms, we express a vision of the world and name our deepest commitments” (Winner 1986:54). Our language inscribes specific forms of power and authority. In the case of the automobile-as-technology, different literacies express different visions and commitments: the language of environmental conservation starkly contrasts the language of muscle cars. But literacy itself is a tool of communication. In order to understand the politics behind technology, we must turn to literacy, “We must learn to read contemporary interpretations…to see exactly what notion of society is being chosen” (Winner 1986:137).
**Global Media, Local Readers**

Henry Jenkins offers a model for uncovering the political consequences of competing literacies. Jenkins, a media studies scholar, premises his work on taking readers seriously. Like Gee, Jenkins argues that different audiences read texts in different ways. Jenkins argues that when communities receive outside media, “unpredictable and contradictory meanings that get ascribed to those [media] as they are decontextualized and recontextualized at the sites of consumption” (Jenkins 2006). The message that media producers send out is rarely the message that audiences receive. Instead, when local audiences consume global media, the audiences almost always resist global readings in favor if local ones. Most audiences “will negotiate with this imported culture in ways that reflect the local interests of media consumers rather than the global interests of media producers” (Jenkins 2006:157). Readers favor their own culture, their own affinity groups.

Jenkins’ likens fan cultures to Michel de Certeau’s notion of textual poachers. Fans consume and produce media “not as cultural dupes, social misfits, or mindless consumers, but rather as, in de Certeau’s terms, ‘poachers’ of textual meanings” (Jenkins 2006:40). Fan cultures pilfer bits and pieces from a larger media pool, reworking them into something that is both familiar and novel. They are “cultural scavengers, [who] reclaim works that others regard as ‘worthless’ trash, finding them a source of popular
For fan communities, popular culture becomes a source of raw materials from which to build new texts and new meanings.

For Jenkins, this re-appropriation is both playful and political. Fan production is playful because it involves a delicate balance between fidelity and fantasy. As textual poachers, fans make a series of “advances and retreats” from the primary text. Fans remain true to certain themes or details, while disregarding others. In the case of Star Trek, for example, fan-made production often takes the form of fan-fiction – of fan-made narratives that are shared among a community of readers – stories that often stay true to the world of the original series, while altering certain characters and events. In terms of fan-fiction “reading becomes a kind of play, responsive only to its own loosely structured rules and generating its own kinds of pleasure” (Jenkins 2006:39). Fan production is a game of puzzle pieces, of assembling bits of media in precise and provocative ways to create personal stories and to reflect local identities.

Within this playful reconstruction is the politics of representation. Fans respect source material, yet they also recognize the inability of outside media to fulfill local needs. As Jenkins’ notes, fans are a “network of readers and writers who remake programs in their own image… [who] pry open space for their cultural concerns within dominant representations” (Jenkins 2006:40). Fans play with media texts in order to make them more palatable and more personal. Fans do not blindly accept the
representation of media producers, but instead they create their own representations. Fan production is “a way of appropriating media texts and rereading them in a fashion that serves different interests” (Jenkins 2006:40). Fan production allows communities to build their own representations and voice their own interests.

These local representations challenge the conventional relationship between media producers and media consumers – or in terms of literacy, these rearticulations challenge conventional reading practices. As textual poachers, fans “redefine the politics of reading, [by viewing] textual property not as the exclusive domain of textual producers but as open to repossession by textual consumers” (Jenkins 2006:60). Fan communities uproot conventional literacy. Fan production resists the representation of media producers and instead blurs the distinction between producers and consumers. As a result, “the fan constitutes a scandalous category in contemporary American culture…One that provokes an excessive response from those committed to the interests of textual producers” (Jenkins 2006:39). Fans are disparaged and derided because they subvert the traditional power structure, the politics, of media production.

Today, digital technologies only amplify this power of fan communities to create their own literacies. As Jenkins has since argued, digital culture transforms both the pace and the process of fan production. Today fan communities emerge and evolve at breakneck speed. Together digital technologies and the Internet allow “new fandoms
emerge… in some cases before media products actually reach the market” (Jenkins 2006:142). Fan communities appropriate texts before mainstream audiences, further cementing their position as knowledgeable insiders. Digital technologies also offer fan communities new means of reproducing media texts. Digital texts are reproducible and malleable. Audiences can decode and delimit digital texts with the click of a mouse. Computer applications make digital editing into another form of technical play, wherein fan communities can make their own media products on nearly the same level as commercial media outlets. Moreover, through information communication technologies like the Web, these communities can distribute their productions with increasing ease.

Fan-production and distribution is the embodiment of emerging literacies. Through digital production, fan communities cultivate both their own texts and their own strategies for reading texts. Digital technologies allow communities to contest the media landscape with new media forms and media practices. And, as Jenkins argues, “these new technologies would support and sustain a range of different cultural and political projects, some overtly oppositional, others more celebratory, yet all reflecting a public desire to participate within, rather than simply consume, media” (Jenkins 2006:152). This notion of participation foregrounds the politics of emerging literacies; to offer one’s own voice, one’s own representation, rather than yielding to the voice of
others. Through local rearticulations of global media, fan communities become critical participants in the struggle for representation and self-definition.

**Bloomberg vs. “Brotha”: Political Representation in the 21st Century**

Moving back to the world of video game trailers, we can use Jenkins and Winner to shed light on the political consequences of competing literacies. Video game trailers are a technology in Winner’s three-pronged definition of the term. They are an artifact, a technique (semiotic domain), and a social practice. As we have seen, video game trailers are socially constructed. Affinity groups challenge and contest readings within the domain. The definition of “video game trailers” depends on the interaction of fan communities, outside voices, and the gaming industry as a whole. Through these social interactions, video game trailers are political. Each reading – each literacy – not only represents certain affinity groups, but also certain social realities. Fan-made trailers in particular offer an alternative literacy to conventional mainstream readings of media.

The conflict between fan-made trailers and conventional literacy is a conflict over representation. In particular, when Bloomberg and others critique video games and trailers, they critique the representations within those texts. Senators Clinton and Lieberman decry the representation of sexual intercourse within *GTA: San Andreas*. Jack Thompson chastises the representation of murders without consequence in the *GTA* franchise. Mayor Bloomberg’s cabinet argues, “It’s despicable to glamorize violence in
games like these, regardless of how far-fetched the setting may be”; “setting Grand Theft Auto in the safest big city in America would be like setting Halo in Disneyland.” (Pereira et al. 2007) Bloomberg’s problem is not the violent game per se, but the placement of that violent game in New York City. Bloomberg criticizes the representation of the trailer as far-fetched and irresponsible. Like Plato in the final chapter of his Republic, Bloomberg encourages us to be wary of “the imitator or maker of the image [who] knows nothing of true existence, [who] knows appearances only” (Plato).

This analogy to Plato is worth considering. In The Republic, as Plato and his interlocutors set out to define a virtuous state, they ultimately decide to cast away poets. Plato decries the poet and other imitators for choosing second-hand images over the first-hand experience of the truth. The painter, for instance, who paints a ship at sea is “thrice removed” from the truth; she has no knowledge of how to build an actual ship, nor does she understand the nature of those objects referred to as ships. The poet and the painter deal with appearances rather than reality. They are imitators; and as Plato argues, imitation – or mimesis – is imperfect. The just society must avoid imitations “lest from imitation they should come to be what they imitate” (Plato). Plato throws poets out from his republic because, “under the excitement of poetry, [citizens may] neglect justice and virtue.” Plato critiques poetry and the imitative arts because
they threaten to lure individuals towards vice and injustice through false representations.

Mayor Bloomberg’s critique of the GTA trailer echoes Plato’s words. Bloomberg and his staff criticize the trailer for “glamorizing violence” within the “far-fetched…settings” of a digital reproduced New York City. These are critiques of mimesis. Like Plato, Bloomberg fears false appearances; he fears a reproduction of his city that encourages vice and injustice. He fears an imitation of New York that glamorizes police shootings and encourages crime. This critique echoes the fears of Jack Thompson who argues that the mimesis of video games creates a “murder simulator,” literally turning players to a life of crime. Councilman Vallone restates this same argument, but in the language of video game players: setting a violent game in New York City is as absurd as setting Halo (another violent game) within the Disneyland resort. Like Plato, Vallone reminds us that the trailer is a representation far removed from the truth: New York City is not a city of violence; it is “the safest big city in America.”

Contrast these arguments with Jenkins’ work on fan production. For Jenkins, the power of representation is not dangerous; it is liberating. Fan production allows audiences to subvert the conventional relationship between producers and consumers of media. Through fan production, communities develop their own literacies that
reflect local interests. Imitation becomes a powerful tool for self-definition, rather than the route towards injustice and immorality. In fact, as Jenkins argues, fan productions encourage civic engagement; fan productions strengthen the ties between a local community of readers who share similar values.

In this light, fan-made trailers present a sophisticated political response to critics like Mayor Bloomberg. The trailers made by All3n05 and Brotha demonstrate a multimodal literacy and situated knowledge that Bloomberg’s comments outright deny. Whereas Bloomberg ignores the possibility of critical readers, fan-made trailers demonstrate critical nuance and expertise. Fan-made trailers demonstrate mastery in multiple semiotic domains. First and foremost, fan-made trailers demand technical competence. Digital media production is not a simple process. It requires time, energy, and a highly technical skill set. Moreover, fan-made trailers require a sophisticated knowledge of both reading video game trailers and of producing meanings through trailers themselves. In order to create a trailer, one must be literate in the representation systems of video game trailers: in the social knowledge, the cinematic conventions, and advertising tropes that trailers employ. One must recognize the signs and the signified within video game trailers and video games, within film trailers and film history. Finally, fan-made trailers demand intimate knowledge of audiences themselves.
Producing a trailer not only requires an understanding of signs and signified, but also the affinity groups reading those signs.

Through fan-made trailers, All3n05 not only demonstrates his technical ability with YouTube and digital film production, but also his understanding of audiences’ relationship to media representation. By remaking the original game trailer with live-action clips, All3n05 emphasizes the intangible differences between our engagement with film and with video games. Whereas Bloomberg fears false representations, All3n05 premises his argument on the fact that representations are fluid, that different literacies extract different meanings from every representation. All3n05’s trailer implies that we are all active readers, even if unknowingly so – that we approach texts through unspoken but influential frames.

Fan-made trailers present a radically different approach to argument. Whereas Bloomberg, like Plato, fears false representation, fan-made trailers emphasize the malleability of both the medium and the message. Fan-made trailers are *bricolage*. They are playful rearticulations that refuse to even address themselves in terms of political dialogue, let alone as pure truth. Neither All3n05 nor Brotha mention Bloomberg in their trailers; rather, these trailers approach a different audience through different means. Fan-made trailers utilize a vocabulary in which Bloomberg is illiterate. These
representations are not rational but rather *ludic*. They are playful. They are dismissive. They emphasize local and resistive representations.

Whereas Bloomberg represents a literacy of the 20th century, fan-made trailers present an alternative literacy for the 21st. Fan-made trailers leverage the power of digital media and digital distribution in order to produce personal texts. Through this production, fan communities subvert the conventional relationship between media producers and media consumers, between authors and audiences. Fan communities develop new literacies that disregard the Platonic call for true forms and instead revel in the power of each community to create its own representation, its own meanings.
Post-Script / Post-Literacy

Literacy is a social apparatus. It is a technology that communities and cultures cultivate to meet their evolving needs. Through this cultivation literacy entangles itself in the multiple modes of modern communication. Literacy is not merely the ability to read and write text; rather, literacy is the ability to produce and consume meanings across myriad texts. There are as many literacies as there are modes of communication. There are as many literacies as there are communities.

Over time these literacies undergo a metamorphosis. As communities cultivate existing literacy, new styles of reading and writing emerge; new literacies sprout from the old. Communities approach new media through past practices. However the surfacing of new literacy is rarely straightforward. Rather, new literacies grow out of a complex negotiation between multiple communities. Each of these communities recognizes the value of some new media practice; however, each also sees this practice in its own lights. Competing communities adapt familiar literacies to unfamiliar ends. New literacies emerge through the (trans)mediation of competing readings and communities.

This contingent and complex development plays out in the field of video game trailers. Communities read video game trailers through multiple, conflicting literacies. Each audience decodes trailers in distinct ways; each enforces their own reading
through specific social actions. These conflicting literacies are laden with political consequences. Literacy and ideology are intertwined. As communities struggle to frame the landscape of new media and new technology, they also outline our experience with the world around us. Literacy is not only the means by which we read and write; it is also agency; it is the choice of what to write, of what to record and what to communicate.

With this in mind, “Competing Literacies: The Case of Video Game Trailers” is a short digital film that accompanies this thesis. This film re-examines the clash between Mayor Bloomberg and fan communities through the lens of multimodal literacies. The film is my own attempt to demonstrate new literacy practices: it is a scholarly fan-made trailer. Following Jenkins’ notion of textual poaching, the film features a montage of official trailers, fan-made trailers and academic lectures. The film also includes live-action video documenting an online investigation of the Bloomberg controversy—a strategy that draws attention to the fact that online communities are already engaged in learning new literacies through digital production and distribution.

**Building on the Framework**

Further work on this project could take two related paths: First, one could expand on my research by looking towards other communities and affinity groups
invested in video game trailer literacy: Second, one could further investigate the consequences that a new plurality of literacy entails.

While my own work focuses heavily on the cinematic roots of video game trailers, there are other antecedents worth research. In particular, one could look at video game trailers through a history of commercial advertising. In this reading, the trailer is merely one subset of a larger field. Research in this area would contextualize the video game trailer within the large body of work on advertisement and commercialization.

Similarly, while my own work focuses primarily on the clash between fan communities and mainstream voices, these are not the only affinity groups involved in game trailer literacy. In particular, my own work gives little attention to video game publishers and distributors – the producers of official video game trailers. Video game trailer literacy is particularly interesting in terms of publishers and distributors because these commercial companies rely on trailers to sell their product. As a result, one would expect the video game industry to have a strong internal literacy for video game trailers. As other research has shown, market-based firms are often the first to critically examine how individuals – in this case, customers – will engage with new texts.

Beyond affinity groups, forthcoming research could also continue an investigation into the political consequences of literacy. As mentioned, most literacy
scholars from Havelock and Ong to Gee and Jenkins recognize that literacy practices are political. However, the politics of literacy is often expressed in utopian terms. We often theorize literacy as an empowering tool without considering its adverse affects. This is a problem that Claude Levi-Strauss emphasizes in his essay, “The Writing Lesson.” In this essay, Levi-Strauss recounts his experience teaching a Nambikwara chief a writing lesson. After the lesson, the chief quickly recognizes the power that literacy grants him over his illiterate subjects. Here literacy becomes a tool of subjugation rather than a means of empowerment.

Levi-Strauss’ essay offers a compelling line of research into the literacy of video game trailers. This research could look at how power relationships change when fan communities become literate and mainstream society becomes illiterate in new media. Do gamers literate in video game trailers wield power over illiterate audiences? Moreover, how is this relationship complicated by the fact that gamers and fan communities are the social opposites of tribal chieftains? Whereas a tribal chief can leverage power with or without literacy, is the same true of small fan communities?

A New Apparatus?

Beyond these examples, my work also brings into question the strength of literacy as a framework for the problem of competing readings. Initially, the problem of multiple readings is well explained by a multimodal literacy. Gee and other New
Literacy Studies scholars offer a rich description of how audiences find conflicting meanings within a single text. However, frameworks are tools. While literacy offers several insights, other frameworks might shed light on other aspects of the problem.

Building off of the previous section, one could perhaps better describe the power relationships inherent in new media literacy through the work of Michel Foucault. In fact, my own work on top-down and bottom-up affinity groups began as a Foucaultian reading of video game trailer debates in online space. Both Foucault’s notion of bio-power and regulatory power help uncover the strategies that communities use to enforce their own readings – their own politics – of new media. Through Foucault one could look specifically at the problem described by Levi-Strauss, researching how new media literacy changes the diffuse web of power that covers overlapping communities of readers.

With Foucault in mind, I think further interdisciplinary work could also connect fan-made trailers with work on gender performance. While seemingly unrelated, I think the work of Judith Butler in particular could further a discussion of power and identity around fan-made trailers. While fan-made trailers are not strict performances by Butler’s definition, these trailers do mimic many of the repetitive and resistive aspects of gender performance.
Finally, the very framework of literacy is contingent. As the collision between Bloomberg and gamers suggests, new media and literacies are often so resistive to conventional readings that the term literacy wears thin. While we can characterize both Bloomberg and his critics in terms of competing literacies, perhaps we need a new apparatus (Ulmer 2002). Perhaps as the Greeks moved from orality to literacy, the shift from print literacy to digital and *ludic* performance marks another move; perhaps literacy will no longer be enough.
References


Trailers


DigitalPh33r. “YouTube - "OMG, Resident Evil 5 is Racist!".” http://youtube.com/watch?v=NaQmoCvMm8 (accessed December 2, 2007).


zoundsgx. “YouTube - The Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess fan reactions.”