Flows of Literacy Across Corporate and User-Produced Virtual Worlds

REBECCA W. BLACK
University of California, Irvine

JONATHAN ALEXANDER
University of California, Irvine

KSENIA A. KOROBKOVA
University of California, Irvine

Background/Context: Sociocultural research on young people’s literate practices with digital media has generally focused on literacy events and practices that are grounded in distinct online locations, such as affinity spaces, specific websites, particular videogames, or virtual worlds.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: Contemporary media landscapes have become networked to such an extent that a transmedial approach is needed to understand the social, cultural, and literate contexts that young people inhabit.

Research Design: In this article, we use qualitative and literary analyses of products and artifacts from the Hunger Games media franchise to explore young people’s literacy practices as embedded in corporate and fan-produced transmedia ecologies.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Our analysis looks beyond spatial and structural boundaries to understand how flows of corporate and user-produced artifacts can shape, constrain, and expand young people’s literate repertoires.

INTRODUCTION: CONTEMPORARY TRANSMEDIA CONTEXTS

In the turn away from viewing literacy as a purely cognitive process of decoding and encoding text, it was highly instructive to view literate practices as discrete events (Heath, 1983) and localized practices that instantiated the social, political, historical, and highly contextualized aspects of literacy in use (see Barton, 2007, and Street, 1984, for a discussion of the New Literacy Studies). However, an emerging body of
research is drawing attention to the ways in which “locating literacy” (Burnett & Merchant, 2014, p. 37) within a single event and concomitant context may be insufficient for capturing the fluid and dynamic nature of digital contexts and the flows of texts across time and space. Most contemporary products designed for youth, including toys, books, and digital media, are embedded in complex ecologies (Brofenbrenner, 1994; Hagood, 2010, 2011) that blur the boundaries between producer and consumer, and micro and macro contexts of use. An ecological perspective on literate practice draws attention to the ways in which literacy is embedded in an interconnected system of local learning contexts, social relationships, and broader institutional structures (see Barron, 2006; Pahl & Rowsell, 2005). Consider the lone gamer who, while tapping away at her controller, is immersed in a complex ecosystem that coheres around a particular game. She may be developing digital literacy skills as she navigates the gaming environment while simultaneously chatting with other gamers who are playing on the same platform. She also may engage with a range of commercial and fan-produced paratexts that shape her experiences with and interpretations of the game world, such as watching officially produced trailers to better understand the game lore, using printed commercial game guides to select gear, and consulting player-produced walkthroughs on YouTube. At the same time, she may be using a micro-blogging platform to post live updates on her progress through a level of the game, writing online fan fiction based on her avatar’s exploits, and spearheading a player-generated campaign to convince the game designers to reconsider how female characters are depicted in said game.

Rather than viewing the aforementioned gamer’s practices as grounded in a particular space (e.g., a living room or a videogame or an affinity space), focused on a particular activity (e.g., writing or watching a video), or tied to a particular modality (e.g., print, digital), it is possible to conceptualize such practices as part of a transmedia ecology in which this gamer’s literate engagement is distributed across time, space, media platform, mode of representation, and micro (e.g., at-home gameplay, conversations with friends and family) and macro (e.g., mass media) contexts of use. In addition, her literacy practices both shape and are shaped by, and evolve along with, this ecosystem as it grows and changes in response to official and fan-produced contributions to the storyworld. Viewing such activity from an ecological perspective, rather than as a network or assemblage of practices, draws attention to the living, breathing nature of popular culture, given that each paratextual production and fannish interaction has the potential to shape the way the storyworld unfolds and/or is interpreted (Gray, 2010) and, in turn, how the storyworld
interacts with the broader sociocultural context. An ecological perspective also draws our attention to how digital media afford (both enable and constrain) certain types of literate engagement with a storyworld.

A storyworld is a fictional universe with invented characters, settings, and characteristics that has been created with a high level of detail and structure, such that characters and events in the universe follow internally consistent rules and narrative conventions consistent with the source text. Although many associate the term *story* with traditional, printed text, it is important to note that the nexus of such fictional or virtual worlds may be a printed volume (e.g., Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* trilogy), a major motion picture (e.g., Lucas’s *Star Wars*), a television series (e.g., BBC’s *Dr. Who*), a card game (e.g., Garfield’s *Magic: The Gathering*), a videogame (e.g., Blizzard’s *World of Warcraft*), or any other form of media in which audiences can immerse themselves. Paratexts (i.e., elements surrounding a text such as advertising, book covers, prefaces, fan productions) have been a long-standing part of how audiences engage with storyworlds (see Gray, 2010) across modalities (i.e., action figures, author readings, motion picture adaptations); however, the proliferation of digital media in contemporary popular cultural ecosystems affords opportunities for producers and consumers to more easily shape and participate in the unfolding of these storied worlds through a variety of media platforms and communicative modes.

Terms such as *multimodal*, *multimedia*, and *crossmedia* have been used to focus attention on the ways that new and existing technologies can be used to convey content via multiple distinct modalities (e.g., the visual and the textual). The term *transmedia*, however, has meaning making and storytelling rather than modality at its core. For decades, literacy educators and researchers have explored how transmediation, or the “translation of content from one sign system into another” (Suhor cited in Siegel, 1995), can be beneficial for students in making sense of written text. When translating written texts into another medium (e.g., image, video, sound, dance), students engage in a cognitively complex, generative process of porting print-based grammar and imagery into a wholly different system of representation (see Siegel, 1995, for a detailed discussion of this process). In contemporary popular cultural contexts, the term *transmediation* is used to capture a process by which key elements of a fiction or narrative are distributed across multiple media platforms (Jenkins, 2007). Rather than being complete, these narratives are constructed in such a way that they invite active participation in the storyworld on the part of consumers. Jenkins (2007) explained that
a transmedia text does not simply disperse information: it provides a set of roles and goals which readers can assume as they enact aspects of the story through their everyday life. We might see this performative dimension at play with the release of action figures which encourage children to construct their own stories about the fictional characters or costumes and role playing games which invite us to immerse ourselves in the world of the fiction. (para. 11)

Thus, the concept of transmedia draws our focus not just to the media and technology but also to the ways in which consumers are afforded multiple points of contact and entry into a complex ecology of literate practices that often involve the translation, and even construction, of meaning across different systems of representation. These entry-points may be commercially produced (e.g., toys, character guide brochures, videogames) or developed by consumers (e.g., fan fiction, game mods, video narratives, trailers), but all play a role in creating a multifaceted literate context in which the lifeworlds of consumers are intertwined with the storyworlds of producers.

As young people’s literate lives are increasingly impacted by the immersive, interconnected, and multimodal nature of contemporary transmedia contexts, it is crucial to develop theoretical and methodological approaches that facilitate rich interrogation of such contexts. In this article, we use the lens of transmedia ecologies to explore the ecology surrounding storyworld of Collins’s (2008) *The Hunger Games* trilogy. Guiding questions include: What types of entry-points for literate participation are sponsored by the official *producers* of these transmedia products? What types of entry-points for literate participation are created by *consumers* or *prosumers* of these transmedia products? How might these entry-points shape and constrain young people’s literate participation?

**SPONSORING TRANSMEDIA: A COMPLEX ECOLOGY**

Sociocultural theory stresses the importance of understanding the ecologies in which literacy and learning practices are embedded. Such ecologies include the broader social, cultural, and institutional context, the social actors involved, and the tools and technologies mediating the practice. From this perspective, literacy is social rather than individual, and youth’s literate activities are a means of participating in specific social contexts (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; Gee, 2000; Hull & Schultz, 2001; Knobel, 1999; Scribner & Cole, 1981; Street, 1984, 2001). When the new literacies studies was a nascent field, and computer-mediated communication was relatively novel, literacy researchers often made necessary and useful distinctions between young people’s literate practices in digital versus material contexts. Such
distinctions enhanced our understandings of the emergent “ethos” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) of new or digital literacies as collaborative, distributed, and participatory. However, as computers have become commonplace, and digital forms of meaning making have become dispersed across technological platforms, the distinction between real and virtual has become muddied. In fact, confining the scope of research to a particular virtual space precludes the many insights that might be gained from exploring the “constellation” of literacy (Steinkuehler, 2006) and meaning-making practices that traverse digital and material contexts in transmedia ecologies.

Research that looks synergistically at meaning making in transmedia ecologies can help us to understand the reach of sponsored literacy practices across platforms. Brandt (2001) used the term sponsorship to describe the multifaceted sociocultural, economic, and political entities that have a vested interest in promoting particular forms of literate behavior. Governments sponsor literacy directly through public education, while corporations, in their ability to put pressure on public education through lobbying for (or against) tax levies, also sponsor literacy, promoting the teaching of literacy skills and abilities needed in the workforce. And of course, corporations also sponsor multiple forms of literate engagement as a means of creating consumers and selling products. Indeed, as Brandt (2001) argued, “as literacy has gotten implicated in almost all of the ways that money is now made in America, the reading and writing skills of the population have become grounds for unprecedented encroachment and concern by those who profit from what those skills produce” (p. 2). In this sense, the publishing company Scholastic and the marketing company Lionsgate, as sponsors, are implicated in the creation and propagation of various opportunities for literate participation via the Hunger Games franchise. However, as we will discuss in this article, not all literacy sponsorship need have corporate or governmental interests at its core. Many people sponsor their own literacy learning by seeking out opportunities to learn, communicate, and perform literate tasks that are important and meaningful to them.

Theorists and researchers who conceptualize learning and literacy as social practice have provided valuable insight into youth’s meaning-making practices via old and new media in contexts that are grounded in and bounded by specific platforms, modalities, texts, and paratexts. For example, such spatially or structurally bounded research has led to insights regarding how popular forms of media afford opportunities for young people to learn academic content (Merchant, 2010; Squire & Barab, 2004), engage in sophisticated literacy practices (Abrams & Rowsell, 2011; Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Gee, 2007; Marsh, 2012; Steinkuehler, 2006; Thomas, 2005), explore and take on new identities (Buckingham, 2008; Ito et al., 2008), acquire second languages (Black,
2005; Lam, 2004; Rama, Black, van Es, & Warshauer, 2012; Thorne, Black, & Sykes, 2009; Zheng, Young, Wagner, & Brewer, 2009), develop digital literacy skills (Black, 2009; Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003), and form consequential social networks (Baym, 2006; Carrington & Hodgetts, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007).

Recently, there has been a movement to study youth engagement with media from a learning ecologies framework (Barron, 2006) in order to capture rich and fluid practices with literacy and media flows between and across platforms, spaces, and mediums. These flows become networked activities “through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted systems” (Cooper, 1986, p. 367). Building on a concept of an affinity site as a specific portal (e.g., message board) for a user (e.g., game player) to engage in authentic practices related to the source text or activity, recent literacy research conceives of affinity site networks, blended spaces, or distributed activity systems. For example, Magnifico (2010) showed that young adults often utilize multiple modes and mediums to build and maintain a fan community centered on creative production.

Kinder (1991) was the first media theorist to invoke the term transmedia to describe the tactics and strategies used by large corporations to sell products across media, such as films, books, and commercials. This coined term ushered in waves of media research untethered to specific platforms and instead focused on movement among and between platforms. Fifteen years later, Jenkins (2007) revitalized the term in a “web 2.0” context to describe a storytelling process in which multiple elements of a story are dispersed across multiple channels to create a unified and coordinated entertainment experience. In this way, media delivery channels (e.g., websites, games, films) converge. In convergent media cultures, transmedia storytelling means that each media “text” must simultaneously stand on its own and add to the larger story. In addition to adding to the larger narrative, each “text” becomes a new point of entry into the transmedia world and spawns engagement with other transmedia texts in the storyworld (Jenkins, 2007). Here, transmedial flows describe sites of engagement deliberately designed by media corporations to fuel and reinvigorate fannish participation and affiliation with a sponsored network of texts. In recent years, however, media and literacy studies have turned attention to the ways that fans themselves use various sites, platforms, and networks to different ends. Take, for instance, Merchant’s (2013) examination of The Trashmaster, a machinima video created via the highly popular video-game Grand Theft Auto. Merchant uses The Trashmaster to illustrate how fans engage in a complex process of transmediation (i.e., translating game footage into a multimodal YouTube video that integrates writing, speech, sound, image, and movement) to create a text that is distinct from the
original media in terms of narrative, mode, platform, and audience but still grounded in the *Grand Theft Auto* storyworld. This type of research rebrackets the affinity space network to focus on how participants traverse multiple sites as they participate in storyworlds such as the *Hunger Games* series (Curwood et al., 2013) and zeroes in on particular fandoms that travel through modes and mediums, such as the BBC *Sherlock Holmes* franchise (Stein & Busse, 2012). Through such traveling, fans simultaneously consume storyworlds while also augmenting, expanding, and sometimes building very different versions of these storied worlds through a variety of sponsored and self-sponsored platforms. Such nascent research challenges us to think about new topographies and sponsorships of literate engagement afforded by transmedia ecologies.

**ANALYSIS**

**SPONSORED LITERACY PRACTICES**

*The Hunger Games* (Ross, 2012) provides a robust example for thinking critically about the kinds of literacy practices that a media ecology affords. The franchise began as a trilogy of books that quickly branched out into several films, online games, various forms of merchandise such as figurines and toys, as well as numerous fan fiction sites and fan-generated videos. The story of the trilogy is itself concerned with media representation and the power of media in a society. Set in a postapocalyptic North America, the Capitol of Panem wields tight control over its surrounding districts. Having conquered and united the districts in a previous war, the Capitol now demands that each district send one boy and one girl annually to participate in a series of “Hunger Games,” battles to the death in which only one victor can survive. The games are widely televised throughout Panem as a way to demonstrate the Capitol’s control over the districts. Given that a “game” is at the heart of the series, the narrative lends itself to adaptation across a variety of media platforms, such as video and computer games. And indeed, the film versions of the series present the fight-to-the-death games as a televisual spectacle that looks much like a gaming interface, with spectators able to tabulate the survival chances of their favorite tributes.

The narrative is also about the media education of its primary heroine, Katniss Everdeen. Coming from a poor district, Katniss volunteers to go to the games in place of her little sister. During the games, she learns how to manipulate her presence on camera to elicit sponsors and sympathy. She survives the games, and by the second and third installments in the trilogy, she has become the media figurehead for the resistance. Much of the final book in the series, *Mockingjay*, shows us Katniss and her media team filming propaganda videos as part of the anti-Capitol effort. The books and accompanying
films are thus designed to appeal to media-savvy young readers who are used to participating in media ecologies, even making media themselves.

Interestingly, such a message finds itself replicated in the online games sponsored by the Scholastic corporation. The Scholastic *Hunger Games* website (Scholastic, 2015) hosts three games, *Trial by Fire*, *Tribute Trials*, and *Hunger Games Adventure*. The former game invites you to “Find out if you are ready for the Hunger Games. To help prepare contestants, we have devised this simulation. Test your abilities and see if you will be able to survive the real thing. Remember, there is only one path to survival.” Then, much like a timed reading test, players are given thirty seconds to read a one-paragraph scenario reminiscent of situations faced by characters in the *Hunger Games* and are given multiple-choice responses (see Figure 1) to the hypothetical scenario.

**Figure 1. A screenshot of the game *Trial by Fire’s* multiple-choice format**

This “game” requires fluency, or the rapid decoding of text, and some measure of comprehension in that players are presumably making consequential choices based on their reading of the scenario and multiple-choice responses; however, after numerous rounds of the game, it is unclear if comprehension is actually crucial because there is no clear path to “winning.”

The next game, *Tribute Trials*, presents a fetching interactive visual map that looks like the bank of control screens in the Gamemaster’s control station in the filmed version of *The Hunger Games*. With tense music playing in the background, players are faced with three rows of pictures that, when clicked, present them once again with a printed scenario and multiple-choice responses related to surviving the scenario. For instance, one question asks, “You’re up in the treetops when you notice that another player is too! He doesn’t notice you, so how do you deal with it?” You then have to choose
among outrunning him, shoving him off the tree, alerting other players to his presence, or feigning friendship. Your choices immediately identify you as possessing different characteristics, such as courage, instinct, vigilance, or charisma. After answering eight questions, your score is tallied to determine if you win or lose. As with the former game, winning is quite challenging—and purposefully so—as the losing score is accompanied by the following (dis)incentive to continue playing: “Why didn’t you win? The rules of survival are unpredictable. Play again to see if you can figure them out.”

In spite of the online platform, these games offer little in the way of complex engagement with digital media, given that the game mechanics rely on text-based, multiple-choice formats that mirror print-based literacy on standard worksheets and tests. Also, many of the questions in both games focus on competition between characters in which you have to choose to help, to hinder, or to hide. As such, the overall ethos of the games is one that foregrounds a highly shifting terrain in which the rules are not particularly clear, and you’re never sure if choosing to rely on or help another character is the right choice. These are complex guessing games, and they oddly induce the sensation that Katniss has in the books: After a while, you just want to give up, no matter how flashy the display. You just can’t figure out the rules fast enough to deploy a skill or stratagem that would make the games enjoyable.

The third game, *Hunger Games Adventure*, is promoted as a “social adventure” game and must be played via Facebook or an iPhone or iPad. The game is modeled after online role-playing games and features multiple characters from the book trilogy, an inventory, and quests to earn experience points. However, the only social aspects afforded by the game mirror those of social networking platform games such as *Farmville*, in which sociality consists of inviting friends to play the game and sharing in-game currency and inventory items.

*Hunger Games Adventure* is also reminiscent of virtual worlds for young children, such as *Webkinz World* and *Club Penguin* in that communication is restricted to preconstructed utterances delivered by nonplayer characters (Black & Reich, 2011). The main affordances for literate engagement in the game consist of reading quest text, communication from nonplayer characters (see Figure 2), and the numerous in-game ads and product discounts framed as rewards for in-game achievements (an apt platform for critical media lessons). Although the *Hunger Games Adventure* makes much better use of the multimodal platform, it too offers little in the way of opportunities for young people to develop digital literacy skills. Rather than scaffolding the “reading” of digital environments through the sort of subtle visual cues that are often present in other digital environments (e.g., shapes that change with mouseover, slight repetitive movement, outlines), the game uses overtly flashing arrows to guide the player through each step of the game world activity.
Figure 2. A screenshot of *Hunger Games Adventure*’s chat system

Scholastic also provides a range of paratextual curricular materials based on *The Hunger Games*. The Scholastic.com’s teacher resource page features *Hunger Games* Book Talks, or brief introductions to the setting, characters, and major conflict of a text that are intended to spark enough interest in the narrative to inspire young adults to read the full text. Although the site includes Book Talks in print and video format, the presentation for both media is a traditional, linear narrative that is written out and spoken respectively. Similarly, the Scholastic Teacher to Teacher blog includes a Novel Study that uses a Guided Reading (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996) approach to support engagement with the texts via traditional academic literacy practices, such as defining key vocabulary, engaging in character study, answering comprehension questions, and summarizing each chapter. Much like the Scholastic-sponsored games, these curricular materials, although hosted on digital platforms, focus primarily on traditional, print-based literacy and do little to engage or support young people’s facility with digital forms of meaning making. In addition, opportunities to engage with the *Hunger Games* storyworld are highly scripted (i.e., multiple choice scenarios, structured chat) and constrained (i.e., prompts designed to test comprehension).

Another significant sponsor of young people’s *Hunger Games*-related activity is Lionsgate Entertainment Corporation. Tasked with the promotion of the *Hunger Games* films, Lionsgate has built and circulated a set of websites that “live” within the *Hunger Games* narrative (e.g., capitol.pn) and enliven the storyworld and its fan base. These websites, strategically coupled with the release of the first movie, function as a network of alternate reality games.
(Kohnen, 2012) that encourage user engagement with the fictive universe of Panem. Networked web spaces, with strategically positioned links to Lionsgate sponsors, share the network domain .pn for “Panem,” just like .ru for “Russia,” reinforcing a sense of this universe as “real.” One of these sites (capitol.pn) publishes Panem news, today’s weather, and stock updates (see Figure 3). Another (capitolcouture.pn) presents a full-fledged fashion magazine showcasing the latest trends and styles in the world of Panem. The third (revolution.pn) mobilizes social network sites like Facebook, Tumblr, and YouTube in order to get consumers to “enlist in the [Panem] army.”

Figure 3. A screenshot of Lionsgate’s Capitol TV Station, including latest news, stock updates, weather, and video PSAs for mandatory viewing by the “citizens”

Together, media artifacts produced by both Scholastic and Lionsgate provide consumers with a range of experiences bounded by the *Hunger Games* storyworld. Key for the sponsors of such sites is participant activity inside that storyworld. Writing about the fan participation in such transmedia, Kohnen (2012) argued that “fan enthusiasm is most welcome when it stays within officially endorsed boundaries—as participation in the official [Hunger Games Alternate Reality Game]—and is tolerated as long as its focus does not encroach on commercially significant territory” (para. 8). As such, apps, games, websites, and virtual worlds produced by those companies invite participation in the fictional world of Panem, affiliation among consumers as citizens of the world, and, unsurprisingly, consumption of officially produced stories and products across platforms and mediums. However, they are not truly transmedial, in the sense that they do not involve contributing new meanings to the existing storyworld.
LITERACY IN THE WILD

While a variety of multimedia literacies are prompted and sponsored in the *Hunger Games* novels and associated Scholastic and Lionsgate webspaces, young people have also independently produced a great deal of complex video, textual, and multimedia materials that provide more robust forms of entrée into the *Hunger Games* storyworld. Moreover, media artifacts made by fan communities traversed not only mediums and platforms but also storyworlds and source texts. For example, youth-created DIY video trailers and reimaginations of the narrative are readily available on YouTube.

At times, fan-produced media closely mimics corporately sponsored material. In this video, “The Hunger Games Trailer–by Middle School Students” (Mount Pisgah Student Life, 2012; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgGj6VuNF0w), young people closely follow, almost scene by scene, trailers disseminated by Lionsgate. Their interest in acting out, recording, and editing the trailer speaks both to active engagement with the storyworld and a deployment of some technological sophistication. Other trailers and video adaptations, however, show young people innovatively and creatively reworking the narrative, tropes, and visual imagery of *The Hunger Games* for more personal concerns and local contexts. As such, their participation as fans sometimes exceeds the parameters of the storyworld set by Scholastic and Lionsgate.

As transmedial literacy artifacts, some of these homegrown videos are quite ambitious and extensive, the product of prolonged collaboration, authoring, designing, filming, and editing. One video, “Hunger Games Video Game in Real Life!” renders the *Hunger Games* arena sequences as a first-person videogame (see Figure 4). We see initial screens for choosing a district, a gender, and an arena in which to play. Then, we switch to a “first-person” perspective as the “player” works through the gamespace, all filmed in “real life,” with periodic game directions and commentary overlaid, just as one would encounter playing a video or computer game. The technical sophistication is readily evident, given that the designers of this video likely had to use multiple tracks and filters to create the video-game effect.

Although not overtly offering a critical assessment of their work on this video, these young people’s reworking of some of the source material into a videogame format speaks both to their interest in transmedia storytelling and, potentially, to their understanding of the effect of gamification on their own identity. But the imitation of a “gaming” platform also suggests that the video makers are collapsing their interests both in the narrative and in gaming into one another; they see the original story, gaming platforms, and video production as components of a larger engagement with storyworld building that traverses multiple media and forms of narrative.
construction. In the process, they also blur the line between corporately sponsored and self-sponsored forms of storytelling. Indeed, *The Hunger Games*, with a complex game at the heart of the plot, all but begs for transmediation, for rendering across multiple platforms of engagement and participation. This video shows young people not only recognizing possible transmediations but also creating some of their own—some that frankly are more creative and engaging than the games actually sponsored by Scholastic. Moreover, by locating the perspective of the video in that of the viewer, who becomes the “first-person shooter,” the video invites even passive viewers into a much more immersive experience, so that you become part of the game, the blood of one of your victims even spattered across your field of vision at one point.

Another example, “The High School Hunger Games” (THSHG) (Sparta High School Web Team, 2012; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9OFCZ1mfhLs), illustrates a form of academic engagement with the novels that goes well beyond simple mimicry of the storyworld and instead represents both sophisticated digital literacy skills and a critical approach to the narrative that uses parody to comment on high school culture. Produced by students in an AVID1 class of juniors and seniors, THSHG is a nearly 30-minute parodic video that reflects students’ significant time investment in collaboratively authoring a complex script and then acting in, recording, and editing this parody. THSHG also splices in scenes from

---

1 AVID: Advanced Placement in Virtual Instructional Development.
other teen movies, such as romantic interactions from the *Twilight* series, to supplement their own footage. In one clever bit of pop culture intertextuality, the students render a fight scene as a *Star Wars* light saber duel, carefully editing the video to make the light sabers seem “real.” Such media literacy sophistication is often complemented by the quality of the parodic retelling, and THSHG shows these students using the narrative of the original story to reflect critically on high school as a space of social sorting. The “districts” in this high school’s Hunger Games are organized around academic “tracks,” such as science-oriented, vocational, and athletic. In addition, the public nature of this transmedial text—with nearly 130,000 views and over 150 comments—has allowed it to become part of the broader Hunger Games ecosystem, perhaps with the potential to influence how other *Hunger Games* fans relate social sorting in the storyworld to their own lived experiences.

Another particularly powerful instance of fans harnessing the *Hunger Games* mythology for their own purposes is also an interesting example of the structure and momentum of a fan-based social movement carrying across fandoms. The Harry Potter Alliance is a transnational fan alliance and nonprofit organization that has made splashes in the media for appropriating the Harry Potter mythology in the service of civic activism and social justice. Since its formation in 2005, the Alliance has mobilized Harry Potter fans around campaigns centered on social and economic issues such as human rights violations, sexism, genocide, labor rights immigration, and environmental sustainability. A key factor in these campaigns has been leveraging fans’ understandings of and emotional connections to social issues via the Harry Potter universe to foster investment in comparable real-world social issues. However, in a likely response to the waning popularity of Rowling’s decades-old novels, the Alliance slightly reinvented itself by turning to work with other storyworlds in 2012. The Alliance’s “Imagine Better” project outlines this approach to trans-fandom activism in their vision statement.

The Imagine Better project takes a grassroots approach to harnessing the energy of popular culture, modern mythology and social media for social change. It is a place where we take all of the stories and communities that excite us and turn them into fuel for a better world. Where fans of all stories can join forces to turn the fictions they love into the world they can imagine. (Harry Potter Alliance, 2012, para. 2)

Interestingly, the Imagine Better project used themes and myths from the *Hunger Games* storyworld to rally fans around world hunger in their kickoff “Hunger Is Not a Game” campaign. Through this approach, fans were able to view real-world issues through the lens of their favorite fictional universe and also to use their fannish affiliation to band together
for issues they felt strongly about. In a turn of events, Lionsgate instructed all involved parties to remove mentions of the Hunger Is Not a Game campaign because of “intellectual property infringements” (Martin, 2012). However, employing the very same platforms used to create fan media (i.e., social media), Hunger Games fans organized to argue against the claim and started a Change.org petition in support of the international food justice campaign. Lionsgate quickly backed down and allowed the fan activism groups to use their trademarked titles in support of this cause (Rosenberg, 2012). This example stands as testament both to the powers of corporate sponsors to police and curtail fan activity that strays beyond the boundaries of the original storyworld, and to the power of fans to mobilize digital literacy skills and aspects of the storyworld for their own ends.

DISCUSSION

The conceptual lens of transmedia ecologies provides analytical purchase for understanding how official and fan-sponsored activities differentially support “drillable” and “spreadable” forms of literate engagement (Smith, 2011). Drillable (Mittel as cited in Smith, 2011) media are those that inspire fans to delve more deeply into the existing storyworld, such as Scholastic’s games and curricular materials that encourage fans to identify with existing characters, and Lionsgate’s alternate reality game that facilitates exploration of the intricacies of Panem and the Capitol. While these corporate-sponsored activities promote movement across media platforms, they do so in a way that confines literate exploration to the confines of the official storyworld or canon. In addition, these paratexts largely rely on print for communicating content and do little to support complex forms of transmedial engagement with the storyworld. Such structured participation in many ways mirrors the ways that literacy is often viewed in traditional school settings—as a tool to be used in service of drilling down into officially sanctioned curricular materials.

Spreadable media (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013), on the other hand, encourage fans to adapt and distribute content in ways that suit their own interests and purposes. Fan engagement with Young Adult Fiction offers a view into how some young people who may be disaffiliated with school-based literacy practices can begin to think of themselves as readers and writers. Such engagement includes the melding of media genres (i.e., creating a video that incorporates elements of the text and a videogame) and communicative modes (i.e., using text, image, and sound to convey meaning), or blurring the boundaries of the storyworld to make it more relevant to fans’ interests or daily lives (e.g., composing a crossover fan fiction that ports characters from The Hunger Games into the setting of Anderson’s Speak to explore the issue of dating violence). In fannish communities, consumers
created content using the same platforms and transmedial techniques as Scholastic and Lionsgate, relying on existing networks weaved together by social media; however, in so doing, they also created narratives that extend the reach of the Hunger Games storyworld beyond the confines of corporate interests and arguably engaged in more complex forms of conveying meaning via multiple modes of representation.

While fannish meaning-making practices vary greatly in terms of their technical, artistic, and literate sophistication, their spreadability and transmediality support forms of learning and engagement that are often absent in the “bookspace” (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007) of traditional classrooms. When fans “spread” the reach of a narrative beyond the official storyworld and use said narrative for their own purposes, they go beyond mere functional and performative uses of literacy and instead begin using literacy “to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society” (UNESCO, 2004). The ways in which members of the Harry Potter Alliance drew parallels between inequities and oppression in the Harry Potter novels and these issues in real-world settings such as Darfur (see Jenkins, 2009) are a robust example of harnessing both the affective momentum of the fandom as well as the interpretive purchase of the narrative (i.e., fans feel passionate about and understand these issues within the world of their fandoms) to promote civic engagement and social activism in the real world and fans’ daily lives.

Jenkins (2009) has already pointed out the importance of allowing young people to participate through fan fiction in the Harry Potter “myth” as a means of using their literate abilities to affiliate with such a culturally significant literate artifact. It is now, however, increasingly incumbent upon us to think of literacy as something that extends beyond reading and writing into various forms of transmediation and how young people’s ability and willingness (or not) to participate across media will determine literate success (or failure). Moreover, young people’s ability to mobilize transmedia and related digital literacies in the service of their own goals, interests, and investments needs to be understood in the larger context of corporately sponsored forms of transmedia that attempt to harness literate energies and often keep them focused in narrowed ways. To this end, further research must be attuned to the power relations always present in media ecologies and consider what critical media literacy might look like in networked ecologies.

NOTE

1. Advancement Via Individual Determination, a program aimed at supporting first-generation, underrepresented minority, and low-socioeconomic-status students’ access to higher education.
REFERENCES


Mount Pisgah Student Life. (2012, March 12). The Hunger Games trailer—by middle school students [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgGj6VuNF0w


REBECCA W. BLACK, Ph.D., is associate professor of informatics in the Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Science at the University of California, Irvine. She researches digital media and young people’s learning and development and is the author of Adolescents and Online Fan Fiction (Peter Lang, 2008).

JONATHAN ALEXANDER, Ph.D., is Chancellor’s Professor of English at the University of California, Irvine, and the author most recently of Writing Youth: Young Adult Fiction as Literacy Sponsorship (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017). He researches digital media composing practices.

KSENIA A. KOROBKOA is a graduate student in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine, where she is completing a dissertation on Wattpad as a composing space.