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## MasterSwords

Competition, collaboration, and community in a multimodal battle of words

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### Abstract

This poster will explore how one group of urban elementary school students engage with a video game designed to foster literacy. Particular attention will be paid to the socially situated interactions surrounding the game's competitive battle mode. Through our case study we hope to better understand how a fighting game mechanic that uses words and spelling might cultivate collaboration, community, and New Media Literacy in youth.

### Rationale

As video games take a more central position in schools and society, it is becoming clearer to educators that they are capable of stimulating high levels of engagement and learning in youth. Beyond being sources of entertainment, some scholars claim that games are learning machines and even spaces where New Media Literacies can be developed (Gee, 2003). While many studies have been conducted on the literacy practices of secondary students (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012; Leander & Lovvorn, 2006; Steinkuehler, 2007; Steinkuehler, Black & Clinton, 2005; Steinkuehler & King, 2009; Squire, 2011) we argue that elementary aged school children are as of yet an understudied population. Exploring the idea of how a fighting game style "battle mode" might foster collaboration and community could be helpful to educators and better inform their practice as we move forward towards a more nuanced understanding of New Media Literacies.

## Game Play & New Media Literacies

*MasterSwords* (Figure 1) is part of a learning package of iOS video games designed to promote ELA skills. The game transforms words into weapons as players battle zombies, goblins, and each other in multiplayer matches. Players journey through whimsical environments collecting gear and delivering taunts that put the words the player spells into meaningful context. Multiplayer matches can be initiated over Wi-Fi or on the same tablet via pass-and-play mode.

As researchers, we are not examining the impact that *MasterSwords* might have on test scores or traditional reading and writing skill and drill performance. Rather, this case study is designed to shed light on the relationship that elementary aged students have with video games and New Media

Literacies. Our definition of literacy incorporates the idea that literacy includes the authentic practices of meaning making through the constantly changing multimodalities (New London Group, 1996). This study investigates how students approach reading, writing, and multimodal aspects of new literacies during game play.



Figure 1: A screen shot from *MasterSwords*.

## Methods & Participants

This research will attempt to answer the question: How does a competitive game mechanic affect the ways elementary aged youth approach collaboration, community, competition, and literacy? The case study involves ten fifth and sixth graders from an urban public school district in a medium sized city located in the Northeast United States. The students chosen are participants in a summer enrichment program that runs seasonally on a university campus. Researchers will meet with students monthly to play and discuss the game until the summer session, then once a week for six weeks in the summer. Data collected will include video footage of each meeting, and will be selectively transcribed, then coded using grounded theory principals (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As patterns and themes emerge, selections of videotape will be transcribed for closer examination. Questions will focus on reading habits, attitude toward school, collaboration, in-game combat, strategy, sportsmanship, social relationships, mentorship, and communication.

Interested students will have the opportunity to operate the research video camera and interview each other during our sessions. This positions students to be participants and producers, not just consumers of media. Their participation as interviewers during meetings sheds light on what they view as important during game play. The topic of collaborative strategizing has already risen to the top of the list for many student interviewers.

## Theoretical Framework

Games are social by design, and the learning that occurs within and surrounding them is inherently social (Gee, 2003). We posit that reading and writing are social practices, and as such should be examined through a socio-cultural lens. The relationship that the youth have with reading is more complex than building vocabulary or raising test scores. Because of the social nature of competition embedded within *MasterSwords*, we will utilize socio-cultural learning theories as a lens to examine this case study.

## Findings

Initial observations have revealed that there is a high level of engagement for students when playing *MasterSwords*. Excitement and passions run incredibly high during game play. We speculate that the initial draw of a “battle mode”, even in a turn-based spelling game, proves almost irresistible to the young players. However, this competitive environment actually seems to foster a collaborative approach to problem solving. Strategy rises to the top of their chatter, with players shouting spelling suggestions for maximum points and damage regardless of team alliance. The students often lock in to the game’s mechanic of building powerful words.

Previously established social relationships between peers, mentors, and competitors appear to matter. No video game exists in a vacuum, all games and players carry social contexts with them. While *MasterSwords* is designed to foster a relationship with reading, we expect to find that the presence of a mentor is key to pushing students through more challenging aspects of reading and to actively encourage a positive relationship with literacies, old and new. For example, youth often describe their passion for manga to their mentor, who then helps connect this love back to literacy.

We have so far witnessed very limited fear of failure when students play *MasterSwords*. Even when a student submits a misspelled word during competition, they do not seem to be dissuaded by their mistakes. We have yet to see any students walk away or “rage quit” because of misspellings during game play. This poster will highlight examples of how and why *MasterSwords* keeps students engaged through a fighting game mechanic. Our hope is that a better understanding of competition and collaboration in video games could be beneficial to educational practitioners.

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