Digital ontologies of self: Two African American adolescents co-construct and negotiate identities through *The Sims 2*

Tisha Lewis Ellison

Georgia State University

Online Publication Date: 15 December 2014


DIGITAL ONTOLOGIES OF SELF: TWO AFRICAN AMERICAN ADOLESCENTS CO-CONSTRUCT AND NEGOTIATE IDENTITIES THROUGH THE SIMS 2

Tisha Lewis Ellison

Abstract: This article describes how two African American adolescent male cousins become co-constructors and negotiators of identity while playing The Sims 2, an online life simulation computer game. Using literacy as social practices and multimodal practices, this article produces a framework to establish how adolescents use digital tools to construct their identities, and how identity construction and interactions with these tools extend understandings of literacies, multimodality, and self. Data were collected using ethnographic and multimodal discourse methods and guided by questions: How did adolescents use an online computer game to construct their identities? How might these identity constructions and interactions with digital tools extend their understandings of literacies, multimodality, and self? Analyses demonstrated how the adolescents took on student-centered roles as co-constructors of knowledge and meaning that contribute to the ways they need to be researched and studied in this era. This work also challenges educators to acknowledge how students participate with digital tools in communal spaces that shape how their literacy and identities are constructed, and it adds to the limited representation and investigation of African American family meaning-making and identity via digital tools.

Keywords: family literacy, digital literacies, multimodalities, adolescent literacy, digital media, identities

Tisha: So how does it feel when you both create your own identity...like, your own person?
Jake: It feels FUN because you get to do what you want to do in the future.
Gerard: Yeah!
Jake: I can make an inventor like I’ve always wanted to be.

Introduction

In today’s digitally mediated society, adolescents participate in a variety of literacy practices using digital tools (i.e., blogging, texting, instant messaging, and video gaming) for a variety of reasons and purposes, including: (a) interacting on social networking sites; (b) forming affinity spaces around digital tools (Gee, 2003); and (c) gathering information for personal and school use. What is most significant is the ways in which adolescents rely on digital tools to help make sense of both their on- and offline worlds (Lewis, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2014; Gee, 2003; Gutierrez & Beavis, 2010). For instance, emotions, anxiety, and creative actions occur when adolescents read and respond to text messages and emails (Turkle, 1995). Adolescents also make meaning and express ideas through popular forms of remix practices, images, videos, anime fan art, etc. (Gainer & Lapp, 2010; Knobel & Lankshear, 2008); and they shift selves within role-playing games (Hammer, 2007). However, within each of these digital literacy...
practices, identities get entangled when adolescents experience or participate in computer/video games, a popular and privileged literacy practice among adolescents (Beavis, Apperley, Bradford, & O’Mara, 2009; Gee, 2003; Lenhart, Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak, 2008; Thomas, 2007; Wonica, 2013). The above excerpt features the voices of ten year-olds Gerard and Jake (pseudonyms), and me while discussing their engagement in creating a Sims 2 character. Their interactions shed light on the ways in which they process choices, identity, and navigate their roles of self (Foucault, 1988), while having fun creating during real-time video gaming. Their comments speak to the rising trend of how adolescents use video gaming for creativity and gaining “textual/literate experiences in online worlds” (Beavis et al, 2009, p. 163).

In this article, I examine the affordances and limitations of two African American adolescent boy cousins’ digital literacy practices, and their involvement with The Sims 2 computer game to answer the following questions: How do adolescents use an online computer game to construct their identities? How might these identity constructions and interactions with digital tools extend their understandings of literacies, multimodality, and self? This work documents Gerard and Jakes’ construction and negotiation techniques while online, the roles video games play in their lives, and how elements of choice, creation, meaning, and creativity all relate to issues of identity that shape their constructions of themselves and their navigation of familial relationships and practices.

**Literacy as Social Practices & Multimodality**

This work is situated around questions about adolescents’ digital literacy and multimodal practices via an online computer game, and beliefs about identity constructions and self. The theoretical frame is informed by sociocultural traditions of literacy as both social (Barton & Hamilton, 2000; New London Group, 1996; Street, 1995) and multimodal practices (Kress, 2000; Kress & Jewitt, 2003; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). *Literacy as Social Practices* is derived from the New Literacy Studies which acknowledges that what individuals do with everyday social practices do not extend from a model of solely reading and writing. However, literacy as social practices requires social communicative interactions that force us to examine how individuals use and make sense of texts, meaning, and multiple literacies in contexts through time and space in everyday social practices (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003; Pahl & Rowsell, 2006; Perry, 2012).

According to the New Literacy Studies’ concept of “literacy as a social practice,” individuals’ literacy practices are based on the social, cultural, and political contexts of literacy that are shaped by digital technologies/literacies (Kress, 2003; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Social practices involve the ways people use literacy: where they do it, what they do and do not do with it, and how everyday events and practices shape how they make sense of and accomplish things through it (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Gee, 1996). Since all texts are multimodal, meaning draws on multiple modes of representation. *Multimodality* is used to examine the ways in which individuals process literacy through such practices as reading, writing, viewing, understanding, producing, and interacting with digital texts/tools through the modes of sight, sound, gestures, and movements through and within texts. When used in video game playing, these modes present ways in which individuals incorporate communicative systems with social practices to simultaneously make meaning (Kress, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Walsh, 2010).

What follows is an exploration of relevant literature pertaining to adolescents and perspectives of identities, figured worlds, video gaming, and digital literacy learning.
Perspectives of Identities, Figured Worlds, and Adolescents

Many scholars suggest that identities shape the way people make sense of the world and influence how they engage in literacy practices (Arnseth & Silseth, 2013; Gee, 2003; Hall, 2002). Other studies documented the impact of social identities regarding students in schools and in learning (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Wortham, 2006). Today’s adolescents rely on digital learning, relationships, and self, and represent identities through on- and offline participation as ‘experts in the field’ (Gutierrez & Beavis, 2010). By identities, I refer to an individual’s perception and understanding of themselves, their behaviour, lifestyles, and their language—all of which are formed and developed by a tool, thing, or situation. In other words, it is the position in which one authorises authority in that space.

Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (1998) claim that “identities are a key means through which people care about and are for what is going on around them…which people create new activities, new worlds, and new ways of being” (p. 5). In addition, Urrieta (2007) defines identity as “how people come to understand themselves, how they come to ‘figure’ who they are, through the ‘worlds’ that they participate in and how they relate to others within and outside of these worlds” (p. 107). Within larger frameworks of identity and self, it is relevant to acknowledge ‘figured worlds’. Holland, et al (1998) introduced figured worlds as “socially produced, culturally constituted activities” in which identities are formed, conceptualised, and materially produced (pp. 40–41). Urrieta (2007) suggests figured worlds in this way: “people ‘figure’ who they are through the activities and in relation to the social types that populate these figured worlds and in social relationships with the people who perform these worlds. People develop new identities in figured worlds” (p. 108). Figured worlds are described through four components as: 1) cultural phenomena in which people enter and develop through the work of others; 2) “contexts of meaning” in which activities are meaningful and individual’s positions matter; 3) “socially organized and reproduced” spaces in which individuals are sorted and learn to function with each other in different ways and purposes; and 4) spaces that cause individuals to relate to these worlds through “familiar social types and host to individual senses of self” (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Urrieta, 2007, p. 108).

In this digital age, identities are constantly being built and developed in manners that suit us for the moment. For example, adolescents constantly change their photos, friends, and post messages on Facebook and Twitter. They even create new characters or Avatars that express their personal and social identities while playing video games (Lotherington and Jenson, 2011), and are divided into on- and offline and personal and social identities (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). More specifically, studies documented the role that video games or digital tools play with adolescent identities. Abrams (2009) suggests that the identity of a gamer not only reveals what he/she does (i.e., playing, and perhaps mastering, video games), but also it provides insight into the language, knowledge, experiences, and perceptions that are formed in relation to or as a result of video gaming. Engaging in specific activities such as video gaming means interacting with ‘specific groups of people’ (Gee, 1996) who recognize, value, and adopt the same discourses; ‘being-doing’ a gamer situates the individual among others in the Discourse community (Abrams, 2009, p. 3, Adams, 2009; Hinchmann, Sheridan-Thomas, & Alvermann, 2008).
In Gee’s (2003) *What Video Games Have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy*, he argues that learning and literacy in video games are just as significant as learning and literacy in today’s classrooms. He suggests that when we play video games, we take on certain identities, just as when we are learning a *new literacy*. We can create the characters that we want in video games to fit our culture, appearance, and gender. Gee (2003) highlights 36 learning principles as effective tools that are “built into good video games,” and describes how identities are formed and work in learning in and outside of schools. He states: “Video games recruit identities and encourage identity work and reflection on identities in clear and powerful ways” (pp. 49, 51). This quote does not solicit everyone to start playing video games, but it does open up the argument that there is much to learn from the young people who play them.

When we play video games or interact in digital literacy practices, we rely on semiotic domains (study of signs) to help us understand how things take on meaning. These domains can refer to “images, sounds, gestures, movements, graphs, diagrams, equations, objects, even people like babies, midwives and mothers and not just words” (p. 17). According to Gee (2003), semiotic domains are identities that we create consciously and unconsciously in our embodied habitus (Bourdieu, 1990)—ones that can adjust, shift, and transform at any time. Examining semiotic domains as identities opens up the discussion of learning and literacy concerning video games as well as how identity changes within digital literacy practices at home. For example, we might explore how family members interact with video games that position them such that their identities, consciously or unconsciously, shift while playing the game or creating characters.

Gee’s (2003, 2009) work also highlights three forms of identities that are all constructed simultaneously: *real, virtual,* and *projective*. *Real-world* identity represents my real life identity as Tisha playing a computer game. In this identity, everything I am and embody is embedded into this role (an African American woman, wife, daughter, professor, digital literate composer/storyteller, photographer, visionary, etc.). *Virtual identity* acknowledges one’s identity as the virtual character that has been created by the player. For instance, Tisha/Super Mario is the virtual character I am playing; therefore every move, role, or appearance is generated by my choices. *Projective identity* takes on the role as both the player (real-world) and the character (virtual) within the game. Both identities (Tisha as *Super Mario*) exert feelings, strategic motives, and knowledge to fulfill the games’ end result—to win or accomplish the goal. These different kinds of identities that are constructed and produced in- and offline also carry with them a socialised effect on how video games are explored and the effect on the characters who play them.

Sophisticated video games, such as simulation games, bring with them more critical insight and strategic methods. Games like *SimCity* involve active, inactive, and critical learning principles with problem-solving techniques, role-playing domains of make-believe and imagined worlds/relationships that encourage youth to take on various identities in the hands of the player (Gee, 2003). To be an active learner one has to experience the world in new ways, create affinity groups with like-minded people, and use these elements to prepare for future learning. According to Gee, individuals in this space can “challenge players’ taken-for-granted perspectives on the world” (p. 140). The following sections examine relevant literature on this topic.

### Adolescents, Video Games, Identities, and Digital Literacy Learning

Scholars have recognised that adolescents’ engagement in digital literacy practices strongly reflect and affect their affiliations and identities (Alvermann, 2001; Dezuanni, 2010; Gee, 2004; Merchant, 2010; Rogers & Winters, 2010). Chandler-Olcott & Mahar
address adolescent girls’ use of digital technologies in their daily literacy practices, considering how the girls used these technologies for literate purposes in communities of practice, as well as the ways in which issues of identity and gender played a role in their practices and choices (Gee, 2004). They discovered that the social relationships developed online between school and home were more relevant to the girls’ increased proficiency when using the digital technologies. This study was significant in that it describes how Internet-based technologies motivated the girls to improve as designers, writers, and artists in their everyday lives. In addition, Norton-Meier (2004) examined the ways in which adolescent girls created and negotiated rules for communicating and identifying themselves in innovative ways in chat room discussions about various aspects of popular culture; such as music, television, books, and games. As a result, the girls created a Female Technology User’s Bill of Rights which included “rights” such as: “I have the right to make meaning as I personally invent myself as a language user”; “I have the right to play with language, technology and what it means to be female”; and “I have the right to question gender issues, technology and the world around me” (pp. 606-608). These rights shed light on the ways in which these girls identified themselves as “females” and as “language user[s],” and questioned “gender issues” that related to them and their world as they interacted in these online communities. The girls created power, voice, choice, rules, and community to make meaning as females in a safe environment. In a 2005 article, Norton-Meier documented her own multiple roles in the home while playing video games with her husband and adolescent children. She stated that the mechanics of game playing with her family shifted the face of her family’s literacy, in which her roles shifted from being a video-game strategist to a designer and then a troubleshooter at various levels of game play.

Digital tools/literacies have an impact on individuals’ everyday lives, particularly in the ways in which they interact, play, communicate, and associate emotions. This discovery sparked my interest in exploring how identity, through the engagement with digital tools, sheds light on the ways in which individuals create meaning, develop, and make sense of themselves when involved in practices or activities of choice with digital texts and tools (Chandler-Olcott & Mahar, 2003; Gee, 2004).

Youth interpret meaning when playing computer/video games in multiple ways. They use choice to interpret movement, images, words, and symbols to suit their interests and goals. Several studies have shown the success of video game use in today’s classrooms for the purposes of tutoring struggling readers (Adams, 2009), for encouragement, and as a means to capitalise on students’ strengths (Simpson & Clem, 2008). Still other scholars have focused on individuals from particular communities and cultures’ gaming practices, identity formation (McGaughey-Summers & Summers, 2007; Pandey, Pandey, & Shreshtha, 2007), and the impact of video gamers’ literacy habits and development (Hawisher and Selfe, 2007). For instance, in Hawisher and Selfe’s (2007) longitudinal seven-year study of digital literacy practices, they examined over 350 adolescents and adult video gamers to understand how their “literacies acquired, practiced and valued within the digital environments of computer games” (p. 2).

Dezuanni’s (2010) case study illuminated connections between digital media and school curriculum through the Video Games Immersion Unit, which allowed teachers and media specialists to offer adolescents the experience to design and produce video games. Students not only played the games, but they reflected on ideological and critical influences and themes around games and gender, which in turn shifted their motivation for learning (Abrams, 2009), and explored how the use of learning and gaming made up part of adolescents’ cultural identities. Alvermann, Marshall, McLean, Huddleston, Joaquin, & Bishop (2012) dispute the notion that adolescents’ online literate identities
are isolated at school by exploring five students’ use of various web resources (i.e., gaming, social networks, and remixing music) constructed their online identities. In fact, they found that none of the students’ online literate identities were isolated from their offline social networks; instead, it was through their use of multimodal tools that they were able to negotiate their online literate identities.

**Methodology**

As part of a larger ethnographic case study on an African American family’s digital literacy practices in an urban community, this research began at an after-school program where ten year-old Gerard attended my reading class. Gerard’s observations and questions about his digital literacy practices in and out of class verified his engagement with digital tools and his accessibility to those tools (Lewis, 2009). Based on those criteria, I gained approval from his mother to study the entire family with specific emphasis on Gerard and his mother’s individual and collective digital literacy practices in the home and how those practices were embedded within their literate lives. I theorised that an in-depth understanding of the digital literacies of one family would provide a unique and complex portrait of family literacy practices.

**Data Sources**

Data were collected for a year with more intense collection occurring between July and October 2007. Data collection involved three phases: descriptive, grounded, and participatory. In the descriptive phase, I described the activities in the home including thirty-minute interviews and weekly/semi-weekly observations with Gerard; through the qualitative ethnographic techniques of audio/video-recorded semi-structured, structured, and unstructured interviews, participant observations and field notes. Digital photos, a guided digital walk-through of their house, and documentation via texts and emails were also used to capture the family’s digital literacy practices over time. The grounded phase included more focused and grounded methods of ongoing analysis and included targeted interviews, dialogues with the family about the digital walks, and continued structured observations in the family setting. The participatory phase involved both the descriptive and grounded phases with more focused semi-structured and unstructured interviews, participant observations, and video- and audio recordings. These methods helped me to directly describe the activities in the home and communities that would generate more questions and reasons for further interviews and observations.

**Reflexivity in Data Collection**

During data collection, I took on an ongoing role in a researcher-informant relationship. Due to our rapport and my working relationship with participants as Gerard’s reading teacher, this relationship allowed for reciprocity between the researcher and researched (Lather, 1991) and granted me with greater access to yield rich data into their academic and personal lives, as well as become involved in the research process (Lewis, 2009, 2014). In addition, being an African American woman was a vital component to gaining access and it afforded me the opportunity to gather information and knowledge about the family. As Gerard’s mother shared she would not have allowed another researcher outside of her race to conduct the stories of their lives (Lewis, 2009).
Data Analysis

Data analysis involved multimodal discourse analysis (MMDA) (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001; Scollon & Levine, 2004; van Leeuwen, 2008) to capture the multimodality of mediated actions and the multiple modes of spoken language that carry meaning (i.e., gestures, visuals, sounds, etc.) in the home and in the family’s interactions with one another. MMDA was used to capture how meaning was made, interpreted, distributed, and received through many representational and communicative modes (Kress & Jewitt, 2003). Analysis from data such as transcripts, field notes, codes, and audio and video recordings were categorised to locate themes and patterns to answer the research questions (Creswell, 1998; Merriam, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

I also used color-coding to reflect my research questions. Colors were assigned to each research question and inquiry, making it easy to identify and trace its relevancy to the study by underlining words or phrases closely related to the topic at hand from the original transcript. I color-coded instances in which these categories captured the interaction (Merriam, 2001). Using the color-coded categories alongside the transcripts, I looked for situations in which the family enacted digital literacies in the home. Coding assisted me in identifying notations to easily develop, assess, and modify as needed during the collection and analysis simultaneously (Merriam, 2001; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The following sections represent the findings.

Gerard and Jake: Designing, Negotiating, and Strategising a Sims 2 Character

Ten year-old Gerard is an avid digital literacy user. He would occasionally create digital comic strips, troubleshoot, and text and instant message with his mother. One activity he thoroughly enjoyed was playing *The Sims 2*, an online life simulation game. One day, while collecting data at Gerard’s house, I met his 10 year-old cousin, Jake. Together they leisurely engaged in the creation of *The Sims 2* characters for several hours (Lewis, 2009). They created from scratch artificial life-forms, or A-life, with personalities, feelings, and emotions that developed over time. I refer to this process as dig-entities (or digital identities): individuals design identities that come to life when merged with on- and offline worlds. Through these characters, Gerard and Jake created fictitious worlds that imitated real life. Just as in real life, the Sims have several life stages of development. They can attend school, marry, engage in relationships, and even die. Gerard and Jake’s most commonly played life stage is the “adult” stage. Their purpose was to create an adult character’s lifestyle by obtaining employment, status, and building a home while maintaining friendships in the *SimCity* community.

Figure 1. *The Sims 2* characters
Sim characters are driven by their needs (i.e., sleep, social interaction, and hunger). Each Sim has a meter that appears on the screen that indicates its need for a specific thing by shifting from green (satisfied) to red (desperation, which requires immediate action). Often overlapping in dialogues, Gerard and Jake explained how they created and designed their fictitious character from scratch. Gerard explained that the game “starts out with nobody”: just diamond-shaped tops spinning in the middle of the screen that, through the actions of the player, transformed into a character.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Images</th>
<th>Verbal Interaction</th>
<th>Nonverbal Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><img src="image1.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>1a. G: It starts out with nobody.</td>
<td>1a. (Instrumental music plays throughout the interaction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image2.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>1b. G: It’s better when you create a story…. And then you can do this body morphing stuff.</td>
<td>1b. (Blank screen is shown with a diamond-shaped top that spins and an animated white male figure appears)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image3.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>1c. J: Okay gender. Click it again. Just click accept Sim.</td>
<td>1b. (Gerard and Jake keep their eyes on the television screen; both have remotes in their hands)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image4.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>2a. T: So how do you know what to do?</td>
<td>2a. (Blank screen is shown with a diamond-shaped top that spins and an animated white male figure appears)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image5.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>2b. G: Because Jake played this game before.</td>
<td>2b. (Animated white male figure appears on the screen, including a side profile of the figure)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image6.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>2c. T: So how do you know what kind of person he will be?</td>
<td>2c. (Title options are shown on the left of the screen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image7.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>2d. J: You don’t. You make your own person…</td>
<td>2c. (With remotes in hand, Jake quickly clicks on the body morphing icons and chooses other icons to consider)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><img src="image8.jpg" alt="Image" /></td>
<td>2e. G: You just see how it looks.</td>
<td>2b. (Jake is quickly choosing various shirts and color of the animated male; holds the remote steadily in his hand; sits erect)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Gerard and Jake created a character named Jake, a white adult male who emerged onto the screen wearing a brown T-shirt, blue jeans, and a brunette rock star’s hairstyle. Jake’s lifestyle included real-life problems and relationships, and each took turns to collectively develop ideas, problem-solve, generate choices, and make changes to their character. Holding the remote control with his eyes focused on the screen, Gerard informed me of the “body morphing stuff” that players could use to create certain features for the character. They were excited about making sure their character had the appropriate style and look, which reflected clothing that the real-life Gerard and Jake would wear.

Both boys made strategic choices on which they agreed to create the characters. For instance, when I asked them how they knew what kind of character they would create, Jake mentioned, “You don’t [know]. You make your own person,” while Gerard shared, “You just see how it looks” (see Figure 2). Here, they made, created, and remade over again to construct and negotiate the identities they have in their minds. Unlike comic strips, in which the designer must create characters from scratch using a pencil to erase and restart again, creating online characters gave Gerard and Jake quicker and sharper choices and movements to choose from. They made quick overlapping verbal and nonverbal gestures and changes throughout this interaction, showing: (a) how comfortable they were with the remote control (i.e., shifting items to collaborate on the creation of characters); (b) how Jake made more visual changes (i.e., changing Jake’s clothes), while Gerard directed the designing with verbal commands (i.e., “All the way to there…. Down like that”); and (c) how both compromised and worked together to make those choices (i.e., one manipulating the remote control while the other provided instructions).
Indeed, Gerard and Jake took on mutual responsibilities while creating Jake. Jake made modally dense choices by quickly clicking the buttons or scanning the upper and lower parts of Jake’s body to choose his clothes, while Gerard watched. Gerard recognised how and where certain parts should be emphasised and sought to change the design by saying things like, “Change the color…Go down…All the way to there. Down….Down.” In this way, Gerard identified certain flaws in the character that, in his opinion, needed to be reshaped (lines 3d-3g). Instead of manipulating a character that was “ready to go,” Gerard and Jake created and produced their own character—one they had imagined together. This proactive way of playing and learning to make meaning through design was self-motivated, intrinsically compelling, and engaging for them that made transforming identities of their character Jake unique.

Gerard and Jake: Taking on and Transforming Identities

Gerard and Jake took on identities and transformed old ones to make their story unique and complex, but these identities also helped them make sense of their own lives. For instance, their design choices spoke to how their personal and fictitious character’s identities were constructed as they sat elbow to elbow while playing the video game (see Figure 2). Gerard and Jake taught me how they manipulated texts, images, and colors, and used these elements to create and understand meaning in their online exchanges.

Gerard and Jake’s conversations, social interactions, and cultural models (Gee, 2003) played a significant role in their construction of their identities and the development of characters. The more Gerard and Jake spoke about, positioned, and created their characters, the more the way they spoke to each another changed. For instance, they began to speak the language of gamers—more mechanical and critical, similar to the way individuals text while using cell phones (Drouin & Davis, 2009; Drouin, 2011)—in verbal and visual codes typically used by those who know the system of creating and playing video games (Driscoll, 2008; Ensslin, 2011; Lewis, 2009; 2011; 2013). What is important to note is how Gerard and Jake consciously produced these various modes in this exchange that changed their understandings of the game. Their movements, modes, and language were more intentional and positioned them to describe Jake and themselves in this practice.

As Gerard and Jake continued to create their character, Jake became deeply connected to the identity of Jake. He attempted to make Jake look similar to him, thus intersecting online and offline worlds.
Figure 3. Jake changing Jake’s hair color

Jake’s comment, “I’m blonde so I’ll make him like ME!” (line 1a) is one example. Jake is a light skinned, African American boy with light brown hair, yet his comment suggested that he thought of and saw himself as a boy with blonde hair. At the same time, he moved away from his racial identity as an African American and chose to create and design the character using other perspectives and identities that made sense to him.

Interestingly, Jake made connections between his identity as an African American and Jake’s identity as a white blonde-haired man. His authority to customise Jake’s identity gave him the opportunity to explore the nuances of his own racial/ethnic construction. In fact, as I listened to Jake and Gerard and observed their interactions, I came to understand how video games with advanced programming and design have the propensity to complicate all racial and ethnic backgrounds and boundaries. As a result, video game playing may have an influence on children’s identity development (Brougere, 1999; Chen, Lien, Annetta, & Lu, 2010; Tynes, 2007). In fact, playing games such as The Sims and Avatars could allow African American children and adolescents to formulate images that strongly impact their personal and racial identities (Gee, 2003; Neville, Tynes, & Utsey, 2008). With this understanding, some children may not only question who they are, but who they hope to become (Tynes, 2007). This notion is especially true when negotiating identities vis-à-vis digital objects. While Gerard and Jake interacted with Jake to design and introduce their character to social relationships, Jake continued to shape and reshape his identity whenever he entered SimCity. Since Jake already had experiences living as an African American, perhaps it was necessary to move beyond the familiar to explore new identities and experience new ways of learning and looking at life; a phenomenon similar to Gee’s (2003) concept of critical learning wherein learners use “semiotic domains as design spaces” that manipulate us in certain ways and that we can manipulate in certain ways” (Gee, 2003, p. 43).

For example, when Gerard and Jake created and designed Jake, this activity allowed them to think, feel, act, and value learning in ways that recruited new identities, which emerged when the players took on the life of an artificial life-form. Formulating relationships with the character created tensions between the players through activities and practices similar to those that real-life individuals experience every day. The excerpt below, and highlighted in the beginning of this article, provides evidence of how constructing and recruiting identities were important to Gerard and Jake.

T: So how does it feel when you both create your own identity…like, your own person?
J: It’s feels FUN because you get to do what you want to do in the future
G: Yeah!
J: I can make an inventor like I’ve always wanted to be. (Sings Hallelujah)
In this excerpt along with the previous figures, Jake ‘talked himself into being.’ He saw this activity as an opportunity to choose to make Jake in the image that he desired. As Jake and Gerard collaborated during this practice, they demonstrated how they were able to collectively use the everyday knowledge of designing video game characters with peers to successfully play The Sims 2 together (Jewitt, 2003) and form projective identities (Gee, 2003).

**Projective and Manipulated Identities**

Making the character’s name one’s own (as Jake created Jake) is an example of what Gee (2003) calls, “projective identity,” or “projecting one’s values and desires onto the virtual character” (p. 55). For instance, Gerard and Jake created Jake, but Jake was the one who mastered the remote control during this interaction. The examples in Figures 2-3 and the excerpt both illustrate online relationships between the player and the character, where the player acted as or attempted to be the virtual character. Indeed, Jake took character design to another level by creating meaning and similar dig-entities (digital identities) between on- and offline worlds—between himself and Jake. Though both boys collaborated on the composition of Jake, both unconsciously and consciously, Jake created the kind of person he wanted to be—quite like an inventor (i.e., line 6).

While Jake actively maneuvered and managed the remote control, Gerard’s role as designer was not minimal; and, in fact, he acted as a reflector, co-creator, and co-constructor; actively identifying and making choices about the importance of the character’s features, and offering critiques of how he understood what and how Jake should be represented in the computer game. Together, Gerard and Jake relied on strategies such as teamwork, problem solving, and reflexivity to design Jake. Their design allowed them to emphasize the real and imagined relationships (as in figured worlds) between the player and the character to make meaning through verbal and nonverbal descriptions in a multimodal space.

During their observations, Gerard and Jake processed meanings made and remade by each other. They thought about which movements went first, what modes were used, as well as how to interact with one another and make use of the available resources. This pattern appeared when Gerard and Jake had to work across or translate between modes. For instance, their choice of movements were quick and purposeful shifting from gestures, linguistic interactions, and proximity to each other and the end result were displayed on the computer screen. Both boys relied on digital literacy practices that allowed them to construct complex digital spaces, maintain social networks, and experience personal achievement. In the process, they made sense of their on- and offline identities and became more digitally literate through their collaborative interactions. Gerard and Jake came into this practice one way and left with a creation of a character and traces of extended digital literacy practices that informed their literacy, learning, problem-solving skills, discourses, and fostered affiliations and identity roles in this digitally mediated space they created.

The main ideas in this study are situated in the ways Gerard and Jake became co-constructors of self. Jake, as a real-world identity vs. Jake, a virtual identity, took on projective meanings of learning, being, and making sense of themselves through the Sims 2 computer game. Jake practiced identity play in which he took on different identities and roles in different situations to construct himself as White by changing his hair to blonde, and in the ways he and Gerard situated themselves as designers. Gerard and Jake problem-solved ways to create their Sims character, manipulated the digital tools (i.e., remote controls), and produced and distributed information on-screen. Their communication skills were enhanced because they both found a communal affinity for
creating and playing a Sims character. Through conversations and my observations with Gerard and Jake, I learned that their engagement with digital literacy practices via computer games mattered. I learned that these exchanges with this video game held meaning for their natural selves and greatly influenced the ways in which they created data as co-constructors to make meaning and collaborate through innovative discoveries in their local settings.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

This article sought to address how two African American male cousins co-created, negotiated, and co-constructed meaning when playing *The Sims 2* computer video game at home. The following questions: (1) how did adolescents use an online computer game to construct their identities; and (2) how might these identity constructions and interactions extend their understandings of literacies, multimodality, and self acknowledged how their constructions of the *Sims* shed light on the ways in which literacies are fostered, multimodal meaning is explored, and how the boys see themselves as co-constructors of meaning.

Exploring digital literacy practices, video games, and identities in the digital age creates “participatory cultures” (Jenkins, 2006) for adolescents, in which they become active citizens in their online worlds. Sophisticated literacy practices and varying modes of meaning, choice, and identities flowed through Gerard and Jake’s creation of and enactment with their *Sims 2* character Jake. However, through their engagement in their video game, they brought about interesting challenges to identity that teach us about video games, identity, and self.

Such an activity is extremely important. Not only did Gerard and Jake spend time communicating and creating new identities online, but they also allowed the digital tools of *The Sims 2* video game to create affinity spaces within the context of family relations. They adopted various roles as gamer, designer, learner, and mentor that provided evidence of how digital literacy practices shaped their relational practices, and how those practices transformed the ways in which family members related to each other. Creating, designing, and playing videogames require creativity, knowledge, and multitasking skills, which Gerard and Jake both acquired. As children are natural creators, Craft (2001, 2010, 2013) states that children behave as creatively “possibility thinkers,” in which they generate “new realities, through asking ‘what if?’ and imagining ‘what if’?” (Craft, 2013, p. 131). According to Craft (2013), adolescent children like Gerard and Jake become empowered through their engagement with digital media (i.e., video games) rather than seen as a risk. Craft draws on four key points of “changing childhood and youth inherent in the digital revolution” as “plurality of identities”, “possibility-awareness”, “playfulness of engagement”, and “participation” (p. 7). For this study, “playfulness of engagement” became a relevant feature in how Gerard and Jake use the online space that they inhabit to engage in make-believe spaces as if their engagements come from real life. According to Craft, individuals like Gerard and Jake become self-creators through gaming and generate content from their own learning.

Games are no longer constructed to be short and simple to play; rather, they are longer and challenge players in multiple ways (Gee, 2004). Gerard and Jake’s attitudes, skills, and practices vary significantly in the home and school settings. As such, digital technologies will continue to cultivate new practices and identities for children like Gerard and Jake to learn optimally as students learn to multitask and develop different skill sets for use in varying venues in this society.

Based on Gee’s (2003) 36 learning principles, I gravitated to and found principles, *Identity #8, Multimodal #20, and Insider Principles #36*, to be the most relevant throughout.
Gerard and Jake’s learning during the video game and of themselves. The Identity Principle positioned Gerard and Jake to constantly play with identities and make choices about how they created and manipulated artificial life from characters which told of objects that were meaningful and real to them, but also told how identity work and play were key mechanisms in how they engaged, co-constructed, and identified themselves. For instance, Gerard and Jake’s dig-entities (digital identities) of characters in The Sims 2 game revealed how producing and video gaming held meaning to their natural selves and personal influences. Understanding their literate identities in a digital environment meant understanding not just what they said or created but how they chained modes together in complex ways to design, negotiate, and identify.

In addition, the frameworks informed in this study focused on the Multimodal Principle that highlighted how meaning and knowledge were wrapped up in the modalities that were carried out in Gerard and Jake’s practice. Playing The Sims 2 gave Gerard and Jake the freedom to create a character using special effects, designs and colors. Their choices were made through a collaboration of sorts (e.g., Gerard telling and Jake doing). Jewitt (2006) reminds us that there is more to engaging in “multimodal computer applications” (p. 76) than written words and speech but that there are a range of resources that all work together. These modes communicate meaning to the reader. The nonverbal channels (e.g., gestures, proximity, and posture) carry meaning in social interactions (Norris, 2004) to create multilayered stories that provide us insight into their literate identities. These identities create an Insider Principle in which Gerard and Jake, became co-producers, co-constructors, negotiators, and problem solvers in this learning practice from the beginning to the end of the video game.

Considering “performance of identity in online spaces” (Thomas, 2007) is significant to acknowledge how, through Gerard and Jake’s multimodal co-construction of and with Jake, we are forced to unpack power, race, and digital ontologies of self when individuals choose to perform in online spaces and bring themselves and their characters into being.

Power. Issues of power dominate certain practices and relationships in the home and on local and global levels. Barton and Hamilton (2000) argue that “Literacy practices are patterned by social institutions and power relations, and some literacies are more dominant, visible and influential than others” (p. 8). Power is “produced and enacted in and through discourses, relationships, activities, spaces and times by people as they compete for access to control of resources, tools and identities” (Lewis, Enciso, & Moje, 2007, p. 17). Foucault (1984) describes power as “productive” when it is developed from interactions and relationships. However, as in most relationships, there is always one who is more dominant than the other—an imbalance of power that is maintained in various spaces. As power relationships develop and are embedded in everyday social practices, some are less visible and less supported. I chose to highlight how adolescents like Gerard and Jake want and need to provide power structures when co-constructing, negotiating, and creating in online spaces.

During their interactions, Gerard and Jake showed us discourses and participation with Jake, and the modes used revealed how their relationships have influenced digital literacies. We see how digital literacies have influenced and provided a new insight on today’s digitised families and their relationships, changing and challenging them over time. Jake appeared to enhance power structures when creating Jake by deciding to call their character’s name Jake when both of them were engaging in this activity. Saying, “I’m blonde so I’ll make him like ME!” also revealed that he took control of the identity of their character. Jake’s verbal and nonverbal control of commands via the remote control exemplified power through unspoken rules. However, Gerard guided and coached Jake through Jake’s transformation, which afforded apprenticeship models and
negotiating skills, materialising new transformations and constructions of self. Issues of power are also linked to how individuals see themselves within fictitious online activities. Thomas (2007) states:

Children are learning skills of collaborative problem solving, technological literacy, and how to manage responsibilities of power. They are also learning to accept and understand themselves better as they experiment with elements of their own identities. Furthermore, they are learning to understand, tolerate, and live with a range of other people from diverse backgrounds: all desirable skills for their social futures” (p. 186).

Gerard’s and Jake’s narratives and actions serve as backdrops for how both boys acknowledged themselves as strong components in their roles of creating Jake, interpreting multimodal modes and codes; as well as in their roles and responsibilities of having and emphasising power. They reacted to their commands, were drawn to the character’s features, make up, and actions, and valued certain actions and outcomes over others, all while relating to one another in time and spatial contexts.

Race. This work also offers insight into how binaries are interpreted in digital literacy research that can create oppositions in how game creators and others view issues like race. Kirkland (2013) suggests, “it is important to understand race as an element of history not to be separated from the bound compartments of time to which is forever tied” (p. 117). However, there still lies a mask of how discussions of race are perceived via digital tools. In a popular video game blog, Good (n.d.) stated, “[I]n American games industry dominated, marketed to and consumed mostly by white males, discussions of race and class can quickly hit a wall, blocked by insistence that the subject is inappropriate for a pursuit that should be colorblind in basis.” The fact that the participants in this research are African Americans from urban communities is significant to how they construct meaning and process the digital in their worlds and others that look like them. It is also significant that the Internet, video games, and other digital tools work to “differentially screen users by race, ethnicity, and language use” (Nakamura, 2008, p. 33) even when African American youth ages 8-18 play 30 minutes more video games than Whites (Roberts, Foehr, & Rideout, 2005) and most of the characters feature young white males (Packwood, 2011). For instance, individuals have the choice to change and distort video game characters to different ethnicities and positions, yet very seldom do we have to explain such digital literacy practices when individuals are from the mainstream society. It is known that these digital literacy practices are mostly associated with these types of individuals rather than those of color. Therefore, what needs to be explored are the links between adolescents, identity formation, and gaming across contested spaces in the home, especially for adolescents of color.

Banks (2006) suggest that “we know almost nothing about the uses to which African Americans put digital technologies or the processes by which they develop the skills, abilities, and approaches that will enable them to use computers, the Internet, or any other related tool or process in culturally relevant, individually meaningful ways” (p. 68). Nakamura (2008) describes a lack of visual culture of computing among African Americans and Latinos. However, she adds that movies like The Matrix trilogies attempt to depict African American males as a driving force to computers and as sound members in cyberspace, reproducing white male privilege. Yet, she shares that in games such as Avatars, “black men are underrepresented as game designers” (p. 18).

Putting a label of color on families like Gerard’s and Jake’s makes their story significant, yet when I report on African American families’ digital literacy practices, it is
difficult for some researchers and reviewers to understand that there still lies a post-discourse of the digital divide era of adolescents like Gerard and Jake, who have access to digital tools and are avid digital literacy users and strategists, but who are marginalised by their sophisticated digital literacy practices. Banks adds that Blacks who have agency online and have crossed the Digital Divide talk b(ack)ack “to postmodern theories of race, to ideas about the role of technology in African American life, and to thoughts about how to address problems of systematically differentiated access” (p. 72). In addition, he notes that most individuals claim a Black identity—one overtly described in their usernames—on dating online services, chat rooms, or on African American geared information/educational sites. Therefore, I identify how race is a necessary component to have when describing Gerard and Jake’s participation with their Sims 2 character and themselves.

**Digital Ontologies of Self.** Throughout the themes in this study, an important meta-theme suggests the notion of ontology and what it means for adolescents “to be” their real and virtual selves. For Gerard and Jake, the ways they engaged online are the same as they are offline, as they describe who they are and how they understand their literacy practices and the choices they make. Through this, I argue for digital ontologies of self to highlight what it means “to be” when creating and engaging in digital literacy practices and our representations of ourselves. For instance, we all have notions of who and how we want to be when ideas, decisions, and images are formed in our minds. Having a digital ontology of self extends projective identities (Gee, 2003) in video games, but also adds to a fluidity that creates ways and practices that we then embody.

Gerard and Jake constructed themselves in ways that were comfortable for them and how they think. Their beings were involved in their co-construction and creation of Jake. As such, their gender, ethnicity, age, and multimodal choices all create their digital ontologies of self. For instance, when Jake emphatically describes himself in the beginning of this article and later follows with “Yeah, that’s what I like to do. I have to make him look like me,” suggests a dualistic immersion of himself in designing the character to look like him, as well as process through which he was becoming the character. Through this ontology, both of their identities were being shaped by and through the modes, choices, activities, and digital tools they co-constructed and produced. Turkle (1995) suggests “[Y]ou can be whoever you want to be. You can completely redefine yourself if you want…you can just be whoever you want” (p. 184). Her comments confirm how Gerard and Jake were able to co-construct their character but to play out their (Gerard and Jake) fantasies of Jake in each of their minds while negotiating the desires of what they each could be. In addition, Norton-Meier (2005) shares her own lessons learned from being a gamer:

> The video game has a unique perspective in that the consumer (who is also the player and learner) becomes the producer of an ongoing story line much in the same way a reader does with a choose-your-own-adventure book. The video game has the potential to push an individual to learn and think cognitively, socially, and morally. Players actively create new virtual worlds; participate in complex decision making; and think reflectively about choices that were made, including the design of the game (p. 430).

Norton-Meier’s experience strongly relates to Gerard and Jake’s roles when creating, constructing, and negotiating the Sims character Jake. Interestingly, these concepts can also extend to classroom settings.
Implications

As students are learning about and growing up in the digital world, their ways of learning is new and different, making them “digital natives”. For teachers and teacher educators, new approaches and paradigms for teaching and learning in the 21st century are needed to make learning real, relevant, and fun for today’s students (Prensky, 2010). Thinking back to this research on Gerard and Jake, two digital natives, their at-home digital literacy practices of gaming revealed numerous ways in how they learned individually and collectively that can be brought into the classroom. While research has suggested that there are dichotomies in how video games are separate from school literacy practices, Gee (2003) states the opposite. There are shared literacy practices that are hidden and visible, but all are similar in that adolescents use them to construct their identities and understand their literacies, multimodalities, and selves. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the use of digital tools that adolescents bring from home into the classroom. While this work highlights two African American adolescents, Gerard and Jake, and their practices while engaging in a video game, the practical implication is not to suggest that teachers and teacher educators must allow video games into the classroom. Rather, my aim is to acknowledge the skill sets and learning principles that students develop from these practices, and to extend this topic to larger frameworks on literacy learning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Videogame Literate Practices</th>
<th>School Literate Practices</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical Thinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Skills</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Processing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem Solving</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflexivity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Develop Ideas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generate Choices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce Strategies</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaboration</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Changes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sequencing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity Spaces</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience Academic and Personal Achievement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 4. Videogame and School-based Literacy Practices

Figure 4 reveals similar practices for literate learners in schools and within the digital world. These skills suggest that there may be something missing in how we get students to learn in this era. If we consider teachers and teacher educators’ own literate histories, they need to remember that literacy practices come in all shapes and sizes, ethnicities, and behaviours. First, teachers and teacher educators should remember their schooled experiences and the difficulties of learning in their particular school environments and cultures. It is also relevant to remember the make-believe characters who informed their literate histories of who they were while growing as students, and who they were as conduits of learning across a generation of potential scholars. Within this vein, we
should shift to thinking about the ways in which today’s adolescents navigate and attempt to understand the many fun, exciting, yet distracting elements of the digital world that relate to their literate selves. Think of the countless times today’s adolescent identities of who they are, how they relate, and how they are perceived and socialised on websites, texts, and artefacts shift their thinking and epistemologies.

Second, teachers should welcome parts of adolescents’ selves that make them who they are that inform and transform their practices in and out of schools. Assignments that build on and acknowledge their ethnicities and multimodal modes—assignments like multimodal literacy autobiographies and digital stories—allow them the space to be active creators of who they embody in their world, and can make for better and more effective learners and literate beings.

Third, teachers and teacher educators need to remember that artefacts carry modes that adolescents create, negotiate, and produce, and that they should allow students to maintain and keep an artefactual journal in which to write, type, or produce multimodal assignments to capture objects that they like and that relate to both the skill sets in the classroom and in their literate selves. It is a real concern if teachers and teacher educators do not know what to do with adolescents like Gerard and Jake in their classrooms. As described by Woodcock (2010),

“[W]hen teachers focus on how students think and feel what their purposes and values are, what rules might govern their literacy practices, and how those practices may be hindered by school, teachers close the negative gaps between students’ everyday literacies and their school literacies, whether we are talking about the body or any other element” (p. 379).

While Gerard and Jake played The Sims 2 all night in Gerard’s home, their special engagement and environment brought about a different kind of learning that is often missed in schools. Shifting the environment from the four walls of school learning to the world in which they live will create different learning structures that extend beyond their natural selves. Gerard and Jake became “digital connoisseurs” (Katz, 2005) who, through their relationships, created and produced a life art form or artifact through power structures, modal choices, and complex and different ontologies of self to learn about themselves and others and to gain cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1990).

Gerard and Jake’s digital literacy practices exemplify the ways most adolescents co-construct, negotiate, and create meaning through video games while formulating digital ontologies of self within their online spaces. Their experiences extend through the construction and production of texts while illuminating the ways in which power, race, and identifiable notions of self are developed in real and online virtualities. This research explored how Gerard and Jake infused their online fantasies with real life desires that are common with adolescents in today’s societies.

Games such as The Sims 2 allow Gerard and Jake to be active problem solvers, to create and re-create meaning while recruiting identities in a way that could be equally relevant in schools. As video games become more sophisticated and demand more attention, it is vital for schools to capitalise on these media to enhance learning. My findings suggest that Gerard and Jake made meaning of the text in visually compelling ways through verbal narratives and pictorial images that represent how designers like themselves create multilayered stories and multiple literate identities. In addition, my findings indicate how creating online Sims forced the boys to make sense of and reconstruct their online and offline identities in the home.

This work also reinforces and concludes how literacies and social practices are often embedded in multimodality, construed, and then redirected to include new ways of
exploring literacy learning—and they do so with the most mundane objects, such as video games. I add to the “funds of knowledge” (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) theory by suggesting that the ways teachers learn and understand those funds is to closely examine artifacts and the culturally constructed personal narratives that surround them. In this way, we challenge educators to consider the everyday, normal, fluid literacies, the variety of modes, and the artifacts that expand learning for all students. Educators need to implement a perspective that takes material culture from everyday life into today’s classroom to inform students’ teaching and learning in ways that apply meaning to their everyday lives.

In an effort to learn more about the at-home literacies that our students bring into the classroom, it would be relevant to translate and/or connect these literacy practices into academic settings. There are resources out there that acknowledge out of school digital literacy practices, in particular around students and families of color, as real, intentional, and sophisticated that can help build tangible bridges to generalise that knowledge to academic settings.

**Notes**

¹ Computer and video games will be used interchangeably.

**References**


Digital ontologies of self


**Biographical Statement**

*Tisha Lewis Ellison*, PhD, is an Assistant Professor in Language and Literacy Education at Georgia State University. Her research explores the intersections among family literacy, digital literacies, and multimodalities. She takes a critical perspective on how agency, identity, and power among African American families are constructed as they use digital tools to make sense of their lives. She was the 2012 recipient of the NCTE Promising Researcher Award, a finalist of the 2011 IRA Outstanding
Dissertation Award, and a former fellow of the NCTE Research Foundation’s Cultivating New Voices among Scholars of Color Program. Her work has appeared in the *Reading Research Quarterly*, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, *Literacy Research Association Yearbook*, and *Journal of E-Learning and Digital Media*.

Contact: lewis.phd@gmail.com