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Rethinking the New Literatures of Childhood: Cultural Models of Gender in Popular Websites

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Online texts rapidly are becoming central to children's out-of-school literate lives. However, children's engagement with such unofficial texts rarely is addressed in schools, or is addressed in limited ways. To address this gap, we argue for conceptualizing popular media, including websites, as the new literatures of childhood, tracking how popular websites maintain many of the values of children's literature but extend beyond the genres, purposes, and textual practices commonly discussed in children's literature. Through analyses of cultural models of gender in four popular websites—including cultural models of ideal girls and boys, appropriate activities for each gender, and characterizations of the opposite sex—we illustrate how a literary approach to new media texts can be used to refocus literacy education.

In the early part of this millennium, computer and Internet access have risen dramatically for today's youth. In a recent, large-scale survey of children in the United States, Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005) found that 74% of young people ages 8-18 have Internet connections in their homes, up from 47% just five years earlier. Of these same children, 96% have access to the Internet across home, school, and/or community contexts. The average amount of time spent using computers for non-school activities has also increased significantly, from 27 minutes in 2000 to over an hour in 2005. On average, the children surveyed spend 48 minutes per day using the Internet for recreational purposes, including visiting websites, playing games, instant messaging, participating in chat rooms, and e-mailing. We can only imagine that this dramatic upturn in computer and Internet access, along with the use of online activities for recreational purposes, has continued to grow in the past several years and will do so in the foreseeable future.

Although online texts now play an important role in many young peoples' literate lives, schools do little to address the range of online literacies available to children outside of school. Simultaneously, as Roberts, Foehr, and Rideout (2005) found, these experiences are largely unsupervised in children's homes as well. At best, schools teach about online literacies in terms of safety and evaluating information; at worst, schools focus narrowly on old versions of literacy that do little to prepare children for their present and future work, educational, civic, and personal lives. Certainly, safety and evaluating information are key issues when considering

digital literacies. However, these approaches do not address the need for interpretive and critical stances toward online texts.

In this paper, we closely examine four websites that are popular among children in upper-elementary grades—including the official websites of Barbie, American Girl, Transformers, and Hot Wheels—which are indicative of the types of online texts that many young people now use extensively in their out-of-school lives. In particular, we unpack the cultural models of gender that are assumed by each site. Similar analyses are common to curriculum and instruction about children’s literature as well as critical textual analyses of gender in children’s literature. However, the critical insights offered by such analyses are lacking in regard to the online texts that now play such prominent roles in young people’s lives, both in scholarly literature and in literacy curriculum and instruction.

As we argue, critical approaches to the texts that are central to many children’s online recreational interactions can serve as a vehicle for creating literacy curricula that are both relevant to young people and that prepare them for the complex, technologically-mediated literacy activities that they will face in their future school, work, personal, and civic lives. We are not arguing that all children should use popular websites to advance academically nor that schools should incorporate these sites into classrooms. Instead, we use them to provide examples of the types of websites to which many young people are attracted while demonstrating how we might use such sites to facilitate a conversation about the cultural models of gender that these sites portray.

The New Literatures of Childhood

Since the earliest recorded history, literature—whether oral, epic, or written—has played a crucial role in the shaping of culture and gender. Although literature in the past had an audience of all ages, in the mid-18th century, spurred by philosophical reframing of childhood as a state distinct from adulthood (Locke, 1695/1989; Rousseau, 1762/1974) and spurred by new printing technologies, books made specifically for children started to be mass-produced and distributed. The trend toward producing literature specifically for children continues to grow and evolve today. The purposes of children’s literature have been to provide entertainment, evoke imagination, engage children in vicarious experiences, present children with moral reasoning, and provide support for literacy and academic development (Avi, 1993; Inglis, 1981; Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). We can extend these purposes to online texts as well. The websites in this study accomplish each of these goals. For instance, the sites entertain children with a range of games and activities; they encourage children to engage in imaginative play, such as designing outfits or vehicles as in Barbie and Hot Wheels; they provide a range of vicarious experiences, such as traveling to various cultures or exploring historical time periods in American Girl; they involve children in moral reasoning, such as choosing between good and evil on the Transformers site; and, as Stone (2007) has argued, they provide support for literacy and academic development by engaging children in many of the literacy and language practices valued in school.

Although popular websites and other online texts address similar purposes to traditional children’s literature, these “new” literatures also raise new issues in terms of genre, purpose, and textual practices that build on and move beyond traditional notions of literacy and literature. These include 1) multimodality, 2) intertextuality, 3) participatory culture, 4) remixing, and 5)

sharing. Each of these aspects of online texts extends well beyond print-based literacies and stretches our capacity as educators to teach children to critically approach such texts.

Several studies of students' "unofficial" literacies (e.g. Lankshear & Knobel 2003; Moje 2000) have shown that the variety of modalities that students engage in when producing and consuming online texts is one key facet of online genres. These studies provide evidence that by approaching literacy in terms of print-based aspects of texts alone, we fail to acknowledge the complexity of literacy in today's world. Sociocultural literacy scholars have proposed that we must account for other systems of representation, instead of focusing exclusively on print forms of communication (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996; Lemke, 1998). Although there is a longstanding tradition in children's literature of integrating verbal and visual modes of representation, the overwhelming focus of literacy theory and pedagogy has centered on the primacy of print over other modes. This focus on print to the exclusion of other modes has left literacy scholars and educators hard-pressed to address new forms of literacy and has led to myopic understandings of older literacies. It is imperative to theorize utterances—whether written, spoken, or otherwise rendered—in terms of their multiple systems of representation as we move into a "new communicative order" (Lankshear & Knobel, 1997) where nonlinguistic modes, especially the visual, are growing in prominence (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). The need to address multimodality is particularly urgent when users consider websites, where much meaning is communicated outside of print. Ignoring the importance of modes such as images, movement, spoken words, music, color, and layout (the relationship between modes) renders invisible core systems of meaning for these sites.

Whereas multimodality highlights the relationships between representational systems, intertextuality focuses on the interconnectedness of texts. As Kristeva's (2001) work has illustrated, building on Bakhtin's notion of "dialogized heteroglossia," intertextuality is grounded in the idea that, "Every text builds itself as a mosaic of quotations, every text is absorption and transformation of another text" (p. 2511). In other words, all texts are comprised of references to other texts. Indeed, a number of scholars of children's literature have explored the concept of intertextuality in relation to contemporary texts, which increasingly are engaging in hypertextual and intertextual writing styles (Dresang, 1999; Hammerberg, 2001; Hasset, 2005). The importance of intertextuality, although present in all texts, is heightened in online texts. For example, users of popular websites must traverse a seemingly endless array of links and references to other texts and media, including toys, television shows, movies, books, technologies, events, characters, and storylines.

In addition to significant changes in genre, including multimodality and intertextuality, online texts are also framing new purposes for literacy. In particular, Jenkins (2006) has described the rise of participatory culture where fans actively participate in new relationships between consumption, production, and media. One key concept in this changing relationship is "brand extension," or the flow of content across media, creating multiple points of contact between consumers and products. Additionally, consumers are no longer mere spectators of media, but are active participants. As Jenkins has illustrated, consumers actively must make connections among media, piece together information and experiences from multiple sources, and, in many cases, participate in the actual production of media. For example, users of each of the websites in this study must build connections from sources including their play experiences, information from television shows and movies, websites, games, and other media. Each of the sites also includes multiple opportunities for participants to create their own media—for

instance, Barbie fans can design their ideal Ken doll in “Give Ken a New Look,” thus becoming an active participant in and creator of Barbie media.

Along with new configurations of genre and purpose, online texts also engage children in “new” textual practices. In particular, remixing and sharing are significant practices common to those who use popular websites. Remixing, according to Lankshear and Knobel (2006), involves taking available representational resources and rearranging—or remixing—they into creative texts. For example, “Transformers Video Mash-Up” lets young people engage in editing a short music video. Players piece together video clips, transitions, sound effects, and music to create an original Transformers video. By participating in this activity, users take existing media and rearrange them to create original texts, or what Ito (2006) has called a “media mix.” Sharing is another important textual practice required by these websites. In Video Mash-Up, after completing a video, children have the opportunity to publicly share their creations, either through e-mail or by submitting their videos to be posted on the site. Therefore, through remixing and sharing, users not only consume Transformers products, but they also participate in creating new media that can become the textual focus for other fans.

As recent work in children’s literature and literacy studies has argued, we cannot focus solely on children’s books and the practices surrounding them as the only source of children’s literacy development in today’s world. Indeed, there is growing recognition that children use a range of texts in their out-of-school lives and that these texts and textual practices can inform what we do in school (e.g. Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Avi, 1991; Black, 2005; Dyson, 1997; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Stone, 2007). However, state standards and assessments, curricula, and classroom practice rarely address such texts in literary terms. For example, “The Big 6,” a common curriculum for teaching online literacy, focuses on online texts primarily as sources of information (Eisenberg & Berkowitz, 2003). Internet safety is another recent focus in school (Goodstein, 2007; Willard, 2007), as stories of cyber-bullying and online predators have grown in the media. However, such approaches to online literacies render the literary purposes (providing entertainment, evoking imagination, engaging children in vicarious experiences, presenting children with moral reasoning, and providing support for literacy and academic development) of these websites invisible.

Some might argue that popular media texts such as websites fall outside of the purview of literary studies or that to frame websites as a form of literature is heretical. However, as the interdisciplinary fields of cultural studies and performance studies, along with recent critiques of English departments have illustrated, broadening the scope of literary studies can lead to productive ends. These bodies of scholarship have troubled the distinction between high and low culture and blurred the boundaries between literature and popular art forms (During, 1999; Grossberg, Nelson, & Treichler, 1991; Marshall, 2007; Storey, 1996; Whitmore, 1994). As Marshall (2007) and Kline (2007) have pointed out, there exists a deep relationship between literature and media such as movies, television shows, and games. Building on this relationship, Kline (2007) has argued that contemporary media representations can provide entry into current representations and understandings of specific literary and historical periods. Similarly, McComiskey (2006) has made a case against the historical separation of the field of English into specialized fields of study—including rhetoric and composition, linguistics, literature studies, creative writing, and English education—arguing instead for scholars of English to develop synergistic relationships around the “analysis, critique, and production of discourse in social context” (p. 43). As Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2004) has pointed out, the division of objects of study medium by medium—treating literature separately from media separately from art and so

on—can lead to impoverished views of art and culture. Rather, she argues for an expanded focus of literature to include “cultural texts” more broadly.

Others might hesitate to agree to frame texts such as popular websites as children’s literature based on the commercialization of such texts. However, children’s literature has a long history of increasing commercialization, reaching new peaks in our present day neoliberal economic times. As Hade (2001) has illustrated, children’s literature is now deeply intertwined with commercialism. The majority of children’s books are currently published by a handful of media conglomerates that have learned to exploit books as one of many “containers” for getting young people to consume their “brands.” Children in this system are framed as consumers of ideas in addition to products, and the range of ideas is narrowing as control over publishing is placed into fewer and fewer hands. Even Scholastic—long-trusted by parents and teachers as a supporter of literacy and learning—engages in the commercialization of literature both on its own and in collaboration with other media empires (Hade, 2001; Hade & Edmondson, 2003). As Hade (2001) and Hade and Edmondson (2003) have argued, such insights can and must be used to resist these troubling trends through action such as applying antimonopoly laws to publishing companies, supporting small-scale publishers, and opening public spaces for dialogue. While we agree with this critique of contemporary publishing practices, we see the commercialization of children’s literature as creating a need for pedagogical action as well.

The theoretical broadening proposed by cultural theorists, performance studies, and critiques of English, along with the recognition of the relationship between children’s literature and commercial interests, make it necessary to broaden the scope of children’s literature studies to include the full range of texts available to children. By broadening our view of children’s literature, we can examine books as one of many types of cultural representation in which contemporary narratives, characters, settings, and ideologies are realized; and we can include popular textual forms such as websites as the subjects of literary investigation. Such broadening of the scope of children’s literature can provide productive avenues for building connections between young people’s in- and out-of-school lives and literacy practices.

A literary approach to online texts also opens up the possibility for critique of such aspects as the representation of gender, which are currently invisible in curriculum and instruction that focuses solely on finding information and safety. In the field of children’s literature, a number of critiques have been made of how gender is represented. Davis and McDaniel (1999) observed that, among Caldecott winning books, the proportion of female characters has steadily declined over the second half of the 20th century, even though the existing portrayals of girls have moved from primarily submissive roles to include more proactive representations (Davis & McDaniel, 1999; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993). Others claim that despite strides in the inclusion of female characters, females are still primarily depicted in passive roles whereas males typically are portrayed as capable and success-driven (Ernst, 1995; Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993; Lehr, 1995; Louie, 1995). Girls are typically portrayed as being weak, passive, dependent on others, or emotional; and engaging in such activities as nurturing, taking care of domestic duties, and causing problems (Ernst, 1995; Lehr, 2001; Louie, 2001). Meanwhile, boys frequently are portrayed as strong, active, powerful over others, and unemotional, engaging in such activities as fixing, building, and working (Lehr, 2001; Louie, 2001). These troubling patterns have been found in media representations of girls and boys as well. For instance, Christensen (1991) found that Disney films such as “Cinderella,” “Sleeping Beauty,” and “The Little Mermaid” all frame beautiful girls as the ones trying to catch a man and ugly/smart girls as mean and backstabbing. Additionally, Cherland (1994) found that in horror

movies, girls are usually victimized, helpless, and fearful, whereas, boys often are portrayed as dominant and even violent in popular media (Gilbert, 1989; Cherland, 1994).

Although strong traditions of gender criticism exist in the fields of children's literature and media studies, rarely are such perspectives brought to bear on online texts like popular websites; even though, as we illustrate in our analysis, such critiques clearly could inform our understandings of these texts.

Method

Our analysis examines a sample of four websites that are popular among upper elementary-aged students. Over the past several years, we have collected a wide range of websites recommended by young people that they frequently used outside of school for recreational purposes. Thus, the sites are popular not just in terms of numbers of users, but also in terms of children's use of the sites outside of school for unofficial purposes (Alvermann, 2003). Through informal conversations with and observations of hundreds of children in classrooms and out-of-school settings, we have generated an ever-growing list of URLs. The full list of sites represents the interests of both boys and girls in kindergarten through twelfth grade who are from various regions in the United States, a range of socioeconomic and cultural contexts, as well as a host of interests and affiliations. Young people described the sites as fun and interesting, particularly focusing on games, other activities, and opportunities for communication in their accounts. They claimed to have initially found the sites in searches based on their interests in related media and/or through peer networks. Many of our informants in upper-elementary and secondary age groups also framed the sites in opposition to the websites they used in school or under the surveillance of their parents.

For this analysis, we selected four of the websites that were recommended by a number of upper elementary-age children. We chose to analyze these websites for several reasons. First, they were easy to access and did not demand much investment in terms of cost and equipment, beyond a computer and Internet access. They also required little investment in terms of time and could be explored by users in one sitting. Moreover, each of the sites offered a rich array of activities, games, and other media for children to engage them in the new literacy practices surrounding genre, purpose, and textual practices described above. Finally, these sites provided insights into the interests of elementary-age children, who have been underrepresented in the research on young people's recreational online activities.

In selecting sites for this analysis, we chose two that situated themselves as websites for girls and two that situated themselves as websites for boys. We determined the gendered orientation of each site according to visual, print, and auditory representations. For example, on the Barbie site, users were greeted by an image of Barbie hanging out with two female friends, and the site contained almost entirely female characters. The slogan "Think Pink" and "Hi, Barbie Girl" welcomed users into a world that followed an entirely pastel color scheme, which was primarily pink. In contrast, although users of the Transformers and Hot Wheels sites were not explicitly referred to as boys, any images of people were male, voices of characters were deep bass, users were bombarded with sounds and images of explosions and machinery, and the color schemes were mainly primary and dark colors.

Likewise, we selected one site for each gender that focused on "modern" views of girlhood or boyhood and one that focused on more "traditional" views. The Barbie and Transformers sites exemplified more modern views of childhood by representing childhood as

grounded in activities oriented toward using contemporary technologies. In contrast, the American Girl and Hot Wheels sites put forth more traditional views of childhood by characterizing childhood in terms of engaging in arts and crafts or mechanical activities, respectively. Although we recognize that the categories of traditional and modern are problematic, they enabled us to examine key contrasts between sites targeted at the same gender.

For each of the four websites, we conducted two levels of analysis. The broader analysis focused on each of the sites as a whole, including an audit of activities, games, images, and design features. The closer level of analysis focused on several specific games and activities from each site. In choosing the games and activities, we selected ones that children described as being the most engaging, fun, and/or interesting activities available on the sites. We also focused on the more complex activities in terms of literacies, problem solving, activity required by users. Appendix A includes a description of each site and the primary activities we analyzed. Because websites present the challenge of ever-changing content, constantly adding and removing content, we limited our analysis by tracking each of the sites as they evolved over two months from March to May 2008.

We analyzed the websites drawing from traditions of critical discourse analysis and semiotics (Fairclough, 1995; Gee, 1999; Kress, 2000; Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). This methodological tradition is interested in how multimodal elements of sites, such as print, images, movement, and sound, encode particular values and ideologies. Scholars of critical discourse analysis and semiotics argue that the development and use of texts is socially situated. Thus, analyzing texts requires close examination of how aspects such as grammar and layout serve to position texts in relation to specific contexts, to relate them to similar texts used in similar situations, to position users in relation to others, and to take action in the world.

Specifically, we analyzed each website and set of games and activities for cultural models of gender. Cultural models, according to Gee (1999) are the “images or storylines or descriptions of simplified worlds in which prototypical events unfold. They are our ‘first thoughts’ or taken-for-granted assumptions about what is ‘typical’ or ‘normal’” (p. 59). In other words, cultural models are the schemas we use to understand and engage in the world. In the case of popular websites, cultural models help us unpack what the sites take for granted about gender. For each site, we examined cultural models of: 1) how the site portrays the ideal girl or boy, 2) which types of activities are appropriate for girls and boys, and 3) how the site characterizes the opposite sex of their audience.

We started our analysis by spending hours in multiple sessions of reading, playing, and using each of the sites. We began our analysis with broad categories of gender, diversity, and adult-child relationships in mind, and as we participated in the sites, we took extensive notes on each of these categories. We then narrowed our focus to gender for the purposes of this paper. After about 20 hours each of using the sites and taking notes, we then reviewed our notes and identified the three major cultural models listed above as consistent themes throughout the data. We used these cultural models to develop a matrix for analyzing how each cultural model was realized in each site through multimodal resources (print, sound, color, formatting, movement), intertextual connections, and opportunities for participation, remixing, and sharing. We then returned to each site, locating examples of each cultural model and grounding our discussion in the multiple modes, intertextual relationships, and textual practices through which each was represented. Together, analyses of these cultural models shed light on how gender is portrayed across websites for young people.

Cultural Models of Gender in Popular Websites

Ideal Girls and Ideal Boys

Each of the websites examined in this study portrayed an ideal of the gender they targeted. Of the sites targeted at girls, Barbie framed the prototypical girl as one who engages heavily in technology, whereas American Girl portrayed the ideal girl as “wholesome” and engaged in celebrating her cultural heritage. In contrast, Transformers and Hot Wheels depicted the ideal boy as focused respectively on tech-savviness and mechanical know-how.

On the Barbie site, the ideal girl was framed as a modern, domestic diva. The website, which was organized through a blueprint (really a “pinkprint”) of Barbie’s house, had several different areas—including a bedroom, closet, game room, television studio, and garden—each focused on a set of activities. Throughout Barbie’s house, a number of rooms contained various representations of technology, framing the ideal girl as modern. Of the six areas in Barbie’s house, four of them contained images of technology, including a laptop, handheld game, televisions, CD player, console game, and arcade game. Barbie even had a television studio in her house that showed Barbie surrounded by seven images of television screens and recording equipment. Barbie and young game players were also portrayed engaging in a range of domestic activities including cleaning, as in “Shoe Hunt,” care giving, as in “Let’s Take Care of Baby,” and baking, as in “Cake Maker” (See Appendix A). Finally, Barbie was also portrayed as a diva who was obsessed with fashion and shopping. Multiple activities in Barbie’s house engaged users in designing outfits for Barbie. On the home page, users were greeted by a games advertisement on the television inviting girls to “Play games fit for a princess.” Also, in Barbie’s bedroom, a pair of cheerleader pom poms linked to “Pom Pom Divas” where girls could download a cheerleading planning guide.

In contrast, the American Girl site portrayed the ideal girl as one who embodies a “wholesome” view of girlhood and celebrates her cultural heritage. As the company statement asserted, “At American Girl, our goal is to create girls of strong character. That’s why we’ve developed books and products that help girls grow up in a wholesome way, while encouraging them to enjoy girlhood through enchanting and fun play.” The site elaborated on two of the three lines of dolls sold by American Girl, including historical characters and girl of the year, and offered activities for girls to extend their experiences with each of these characters. Overall, the characters were portrayed as wholesome in the sense that they engaged in more traditional activities for girls such as figure skating, dancing, helping others, and participating in family activities. Girls who purchase American Girl dolls were encouraged to select a doll that looked like them. All of the girls pictured on the site each resembled the doll they are holding, to the extent that some of them were even wearing matching outfits, which could be purchased from the American Girl store.

Each of the characters on the site was represented with several objects that symbolized her cultural, geographical, and social location. For example, Addy, one of the historical characters who was an African American freed slave living in Philadelphia after the Civil War, was represented standing in front of a farm fence in a pink dress with a straw hat, playing jump rope, and reading a book in a rocking chair. The doll came with a trunk, family quilt and cloth knapsack. On the website, users could play the “Life of Freedom” games where they collect buttons, shoo beetles, or sell jam at the fair. In contrast, Samantha was a European girl from the Victorian era, who was depicted in standing in front of a mansion, painting a picture, and reading

a book on a large porch. This doll came with a White servant named Emily, party treats, and a wicker table and chairs. Her games included going on a scavenger hunt and painting on a canvas (See Appendix A). In general, the site portrayed the African American girl as poor and struggling—her games involved selling things and saving things in order to “make it”—whereas the rich European Victorian girl struggled to overcome the fact that she wanted to be friends with her servant, and her games involved leisurely activities like painting and learning while going on a scavenger hunt.

On the Transformers site, the ideal boy was tech-savvy. All of the Transformers, even though they were robots, were represented with male voices. The Transformers used advanced technology to accomplish tasks such as transforming into electronic or vehicular objects to disguise themselves or fight other Transformers. In terms of the play opportunities available to users of the site, many of the games engaged players in using technology to create media, mimicking more advanced multimedia technologies and introducing users to related terminology. For example, in the game “Video Mash-up” the interface was very similar to that used in I-Movie or other video editing programs, which allowed users to layer images, video, sound, transitions, and print. The instructions for “Video Mash-up” introduced interactors to digital video editing terminology including *SFX* (sound effects), *clips*, *transitions*, *elements*, *segments*, and *tracks*. Users could drag and drop bits of media to create original, layered, time-sequenced digital music videos.

Conversely, the Hot Wheels site framed the ideal boy as embodying a more traditional, mechanically-oriented view of boyhood. Unlike Transformers, which focused on engaging boys in the technologies and language of new media design, Hot Wheels focused on actions and language related to automobiles. Many of the games revolved around factory, car mechanic, or racetrack settings. Tasks in these games often involved building, construction, assembling and detailing. For example, “Factory Tag Rides,” required users to choose from a variety of frames rims, colors and suspensions to assemble their ideal vehicle. Users also became familiar with terms like *horsepower*, *stunts*, and *turbo*. Throughout the site, boys were taught to appreciate cars according to speed, power, and handling.

As we can see from an analysis of the sites’ cultural models of ideal girls and boys, these websites, which children used frequently in their leisure time, offered children an array of simplified and problematic views of gender. Whereas ideal girls were framed as either modern domestic divas or wholesome cultural representatives, ideal boys were framed in terms of tech-savviness and mechanical inclination.

Types of Activities in which Girls and Boys Engage

Based on these ideals of girlhood and boyhood, each of the sites promoted particular types of activities for users. All of the sites offered young people ample opportunities to consume products and engage in participatory culture, creating remixed media based on the site’s products. On each of the sites, every page had links to view and purchase toys, accessories, magazines, books, and/or DVDs. Some of the sites even allowed children to make a wish list of their favorite products. All of the sites prominently displayed advertisements for upcoming movies and products, as well as links to other toy and product lines offered by each company. Likewise, each of the sites offered opportunities for children to participate in the production of media through remixing. Whether dressing up Barbie in “Fashion Fever: Styled by Me” or

creating a music video in “Transformers Video Mash-Up,” children were encouraged to remix existing media into fan creations and share these with others.

In addition to consuming products and creating fan media, each of the sites supported specific activities for children. Barbie encouraged girls to focus on activities in social, domestic, and style domains, whereas American Girl also supported a focus on the domestic in addition to entrepreneurship and adventure. In contrast, the activities supported by Transformers revolved around strategic competition, technology, and technical know-how, while the Hot Wheels site provided a myriad of activities based on competition and building.

The Barbie site encouraged girls to engage in activities that revolved around social interaction, domestic duties, and fashion. The site offered both images of and opportunities for social interaction. For example, images of Barbie in her home and garden showed Barbie hanging out with friends. Also, from the home page, there was an image of a laptop that linked to “Barbie Girls,” a virtual space where fans could chat, party, and play with each other online. Additionally, many of the activities allowed girls to share their creations by email with friends. A second set of activities on the Barbie site focused on activities from the domestic sphere, such as cleaning, care giving, and baking, as described above. Finally, a major focus of the site was on fashion. Girls were given a number of opportunities to engage in dress-up games where they experimented with various styles. For example, the game “Fashion Fever: Styled by Me” encouraged girls to “Design a look that’s totally you” (See Appendix A).

Although the American Girl site also encouraged girls to engage in activities related to care giving and domestic duties, it also supported engagement in entrepreneurship and social action in addition to travel and adventure. In terms of care giving and domestic duties, girls were encouraged to grow a garden, play with cute animals, discover their party style, and bake. A number of opportunities and representations focused on entrepreneurship and social action. For instance, the “Smart Girl’s Guide to Money” allowed users to create items, such as business cards, flyers, and posters, to advertise a business such as a babysitting service or a stand for selling crafts. The site included an advice column called “Girls Speak Out” where girls could give and get advice from other girls on topics like school, family, and friends. Additionally, in the “Girl of the Year” section of the site, some of the girls were engaged in social action activities. For example, the introductory statement for Kailey, Girl of the Year 2004, stated “Hi! My name is Kailey Hopkins and I love the ocean! That’s why I’m doing everything I can to save the tidal pools here in California—they’re just too beautiful to lose!”

Many of the activities on the site also focused on travel and adventure. For instance, “A Doll’s Journey” allowed girls to take a virtual journey with their dolls and learn about different places and cultures around the world, such as Singapore, Tanzania, and Paris. Girls could make travel diaries for their dolls (the diaries have entries written from the doll’s point of view and the girls add pictures of their doll to complete them). Users could also make a poster about the country with pictures of their dolls. “A doll’s journey” also provided a fact sheet about the country including geographical information, popular places to see, and common words from the primary language. It included a menu describing common foods and one game from each country. In other words, the activities and representations on the site portrayed “American” girls as those speak out and explore the world, but still bake cookies, love animals, and enjoy cultivating gardens.

Alternatively, the Transformers site allowed boys to engage in activities that revolved around strategic competition, technology, and technical know-how. Competition in this site was primarily focused on good versus evil. All of the games revolved around the conflict between the

evil Decepticons (who transformed into race cars or guns) and the Transformers who protected Earth by transforming into 18-Wheelers, or semi-trucks, military fighter jets, tanks, or expensive sports cars. Boys were often asked to embark on important missions to defeat the Decepticons. Rather than racing or mindless shooting, boys needed to multitask and engage in multiple modes of interactions, as in the games “Key Recovery” and “Energon Within” (See Appendix A). In each of these activities, users needed to rely on technology (the robots and items they transform into) and technical know-how, such as using radar and understanding of velocity, to successfully wage strategic competition on their enemies.

On the Hot Wheels site, boys were encouraged to engage in activities that revolved around competition and building. Many of the games on the site involved competing with real and virtual others, either in races or battles. For example, in “Rebellion Race” users competed against other players online. They were instructed to race four other cars on 12 tracks and “Win the race to unlock a new car.” The interactor began with a ’68 Chevy Nova, which upgraded to a VW Beetle, then a Pontiac GTO and so on as players win. After the second level, users could choose “taunts” to throw at their competitors including, “In your dreams,” “Nice Race,” and “Eat my dust.” Other games engaged users in battles against their environment or enemies, as in “Aerial Attack Robot Swarm” (See Appendix A). The player controlled an aerial attack vehicle and could choose from a plane that resembled a military fighter plane or an old fashioned single engine. This plane shot and attacked flying bugs that shot at the player’s Aerial Attack Vehicle in return. Games like “The Factory: Tag Rides” and “Surreal Stunts” also asked users to build cars or race tracks.

As illustrated in this analysis, each of the sites engaged young people in cultural models of which activities are appropriate for girls or boys. All of the sites supported the cultural model of childhood activities as revolving around consumption and participatory culture. However, the sites contrasted sharply in the activities they promoted as acceptable for girls or boys. Whereas boys were encouraged to engage in various forms of competition and construction, girls were encouraged to play in the domestic and social spheres.

Characterization of the Opposite Sex

The final examination of cultural models focused on how each of the sites portrayed the opposite sex. Because each of the sites for this age group focused so exclusively on the ideals and activities of boyhood or girlhood, it was important to examine if and how the sites framed members of the opposite sex. Although all of the sites made minimal mention of the opposite sex, there were several small, but significant opportunities for girls and boys to learn about each other, some intentional and some not.

Both of the websites that targeted girls included minimal representations and activities that involved boys and men. Barbie, through the game “Give Ken a New Look,” framed boys as attractive or unattractive based on their looks and future career goals (See Appendix A). Similarly, on the American Girl site, boys mainly played marginal, supporting roles in girls’ lives. For example, in the “Historical Characters” descriptions of friends and families—fathers provided financial stability, younger brothers were nuisances, and older brothers, grandparents, and uncles could provide support and guidance. However, few males were shown in the main activities of the site. The backgrounding of males even applied to animals on the site where the main animal characters, Coconut and Licorice, were portrayed as female or non-gendered, respectively.

Neither the Transformers nor Hot Wheels sites mentioned girls. All of the characters were male, as represented in their style and voices. Likewise, the images and advertisements included on the sites showed only boys playing with the toys. For the most part, there was nothing suggestive of femininity on either of the sites; there was no mention of females, there were no female characters, monsters, vehicles, or anything remotely feminine. The Transformers site, however, had several activities that were grouped through Hasbro's "Monkey Bar TV" site, which displayed icons and links to sites for both girls and boys. Thus, a young boy intent on playing "Cybertron Robot Builder," a game that allowed interactors to design their own Transformer, linked to a page with Spiderman, a cuddly puppy from "The Littlest Pet Shop," a teen girl from "Dream Life" and the Monopoly Man. The "Monkey Bar Print Shop," which allowed users to create a bookmark, birthday card, or sign for a door handle, combined several brands for both girls and boys. So, even though users from the Transformers site were presented initially with Transformers images, they could, presumably select images and styles from a range of toy lines, mixing gendered representations. For example, a user could create a bookmark with Optimus Prime on a pink background, surrounded by flowers and cuddly animals.

As our analysis of cultural models of the opposite sex showed, boys and girls had few opportunities on sites targeted at them to engage in meaningful or authentic representations of the opposite sex. In these sites, girls had more opportunities to learn about boys, even if males were reduced to stereotypical roles—boyfriends as archetypes of boyhood and manhood, fathers as breadwinners, little brothers as pests, and older brothers and other males as supporters. Girls were curiously absent in the sites targeted at boys, although, as illustrated in our discussion of the Transformers site, access to creating mixed-gender representations was possible.

Discussion and Implications

As demonstrated by our analysis of popular websites, we are now entering a new era in children's literature—one where many of the values and purposes traditionally associated with children's literature exist side-by-side with new literacy practices. Children not only engage in entertainment, imagination, vicarious experiences, moral reasoning, and literacy or academic development when using these sites, but also must traverse a textual world filled with multimodality, intertextuality, participatory culture, remixing, and sharing. However, educational settings rarely engage these new literatures and related literacy practices in meaningful ways.

In unpacking each site's cultural models of gender, including ideals of boyhood and girlhood, appropriate activities for boys and girls, and representations of the opposite sex, we illustrate that, in many ways, girls and boys regularly engage in problematic representations of gender. Whereas boys are encouraged to strategize, compete, and build, girls are encouraged to take care of domestic domains and socialize. Rarely in the sites are children encouraged to go beyond these fixed gender roles. However, as scholarship on gender has illustrated, although gender is often treated as fixed and natural, gendered categories are historical concepts that are constructed, perpetuated, and learned through representational practices. As Butler (2004) has argued, gender is performed rather than natural, and performances of gender are often involuntary and unrecognized. She explained that "gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (p. 900). In other words, gender identities are learned and performed, rather than biologically given. As Lehr (2001) has argued, gendered identities are shaped during childhood by adults, peers, and literary representations.

The stereotyped gender roles presented to children through picture books and other literature (and we would extend this argument to include other media, as well) help to define children's understanding of gender from the earliest stages of development (Louie, 2001).

Despite some variation in the sites' cultural models of gender depending on whether they hold traditional or modern views of childhood, overall, boys are targeted for competitive, technologically-oriented, and mechanical activities, while girls are groomed for lives in social and domestic spheres. Whereas there are many websites for children that do not segregate genders quite as dramatically as these sites do (e.g. Disney and Nickelodeon), it is useful to critique the gendered representations of sites specifically targeted at boys or girls, since these comprise some of the most widely used websites by children in upper-elementary grades.

It is important to point out that, although we argue that these sites engage children in problematic representations of gender, we are not arguing for a response of censorship. A possible response to our analysis of cultural models of gender could be to discourage or ban children from using popular websites. Simultaneous with the websites' problematic representations of gender, all of the popular websites we examined in this analysis engage children in many of the new literacies that are valued in today's world and therefore can contribute positively to children's literacy development. Rather, we see the potential for these sites to be used as jumping off points in educational settings to critique the often invisible categories of gender that shape our lives. As critical literacy theorists and researchers have illustrated, children are capable of engaging in critical conversations about texts, including identifying the relationship between text and context, connections between authors and audiences, analyzing how texts work, and developing multiple interpretations (Alvermann, Moon, & Hagood, 1999; Comber, 2001; Muspratt, Luke, & Freebody, 1997). As Luke (1997) has argued, serious and sustained study of media affects how young people read, view, and interpret texts in their everyday lives. Therefore, classrooms can play a key role in challenging and even rewriting representations of gender in all types of literature (for a more detailed discussion of critical literacy and popular websites see Stone & Schowen, in review).

It is important to point out here that, as Newkirk (2002) and Dyson (1997) have argued, children often use texts like popular websites and other media in critical and unintended ways. Gilbert (1988) has extended this argument to gender in popular media texts, illustrating how girls often resist and critique stereotypical representations of girls rather than passively accepting such representations. We have no doubt that children are capable of resisting and re-appropriating websites for their own purposes in less gender-strict ways. Nonetheless, children's cultural models of gender and understandings of literacy are shaped by the texts, textual practices, and world views they can access. As Brandt's (2001) work has illustrated, individuals' opportunities for literacy learning (and we would extend this argument to the values embedded in particular domains of literacy learning), are shaped by their access to "sponsors" or individual and institutional entities that enable or deny access to particular literacies and life pathways. If we view popular websites as one of many sets of sponsors in young people's lives, we can see the importance for critically engaging children with such texts.

This analysis raises an important critique of online textual industries. Over the past several decades, similar critiques of the children's book industry have focused on including texts with more multicultural and gender-aware themes. The inclusion of a variety of activities for boys and girls, as well as representations of the opposite sex in online texts could broaden the cultural models of ideal boyhood and girlhood with nuanced and less limiting views of gender.

In addition to pushing publishers to change the content of online texts available to children, our analysis also holds implications for classroom practice. One place where schools can have an impact on children's cultural models of gender is by introducing them to alternate interpretations and world views related to the online texts that now play such prominent roles in their lives. Indeed, classrooms are potential spaces for critiquing and even redesigning the new literatures of childhood (Luke, 1997; Vasquez, 2005; Warnick, 2002). This critical approach to literacy education goes far beyond the current focus in many classrooms that frames online texts in terms of finding information and safety issues. Rather we need to broaden focus of language arts and literacy classrooms to account for new literatures of childhood. Expanding the focus of language arts and literacy education does not necessarily mean that we should bring sites like Barbie or Transformers into classroom—although, as we have illustrated, they are useful sites for critique—but it does mean that it is our responsibility as educators to equip children with ability to critically analyze and rethink such sites.

A broader view of children's literature to include online texts is also deeply intertwined with issues of equity and access. As Barron (2004) found, children who have more access to digital literacies outside of school are more likely to gain access to these powerful new literacies in school, as well. In other words, schools tend to exacerbate the digital divide rather than working to close it. This disparity in access to digital literacies creates what we call a "new" literacy gap where, although access to computers and Internet connections are improving, access to innovative and critical uses of such technologies and related literacies are being pushed into unofficial spaces. Rather than ignoring or bringing a narrow focus to such literacies, literacy educators need to seriously consider how these new literatures of childhood can inform classroom curriculum and instruction.

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Appendix A

Website and activity descriptions

Website and Summary	Activities Analyzed
<p>Barbie http://barbie.everythinggirl.com/</p> <p>The official website for the Mattel, Inc. line of Barbie toys and products. It includes a range of activities, primarily targeted at young girls, including games, online messaging, and advertisements for a range of products and media.</p>	<p><i>Give Ken a New Look:</i> players design an ideal Ken, selecting traits such as style (surfer, hottie, rocker, sporty, or smarty) and dreams (surfer, fireman, rock star, vet, or teacher).</p> <p><i>Fashion Fever Styled by Me:</i> users select styles that reflect their personalities-- Funky and Fab, Sporty and Stylin, Preppy and Pretty, or Sweet and Sparkly — and dress Barbie in a hat, jacket, top, purse, bottoms, and shoes.</p> <p><i>Shoe Hunt:</i> players help Barbie’s friend Kayla clean up several sets of matching shoes hidden throughout her bedroom.</p> <p><i>Let's Take Care of Baby:</i> users babysit for baby Krissy, including grocery shopping, dressing, and feeding the baby.</p> <p><i>Cake Maker:</i> users decorate a Barbie-shaped cake with colored frosting and shapes and can send it to a friend.</p>
<p>American Girl http://www.americangirl.com/</p> <p>The official site for access to the American Girl line of dolls, magazine subscription, store locations and other products. The site, which focuses on the “Historical Characters” and “Girl of the Year” lines of dolls, presents users with a variety of games, purchasing opportunities, quizzes, activities, and backgrounds information for each American Girl doll.</p>	<p><i>Addie’s Life of Freedom:</i> Games include simple activities in which users collect buttons, shoo beetles, and sell jam.</p> <p><i>Samantha's Scavenger Hunt:</i> Players must follow clues to find necessary items.</p> <p><i>Painting on Canvas:</i> Players use different art tools to paint on a digital canvas.</p> <p><i>Coconut and Licorice:</i> Dress and Print: Users remix the background, character appearance, outfits, and accessories for a puppy and kitten.</p>
<p>Transformers http://www.hasbro.com/transformers/</p> <p>The official site for the Hasbro line of toys and products. This site offers a number of activities including games, comics, videos, and information about</p>	<p><i>TRANSFORMERS Video Mash-Up:</i> Users create their own music videos by coordinating digital sound bites, music files, video clips, transitions, and credits.</p> <p><i>Key Recovery:</i> Interactors search different planets to recover a key, using a radar screen to navigate across a grid.</p> <p><i>Energon Within:</i> Users launch missiles while digitally</p>

products.

controlling the velocity and managing a reserve of missiles.

Hot Wheels
<http://www.hotwheels.com/>

The official site for the Mattel line of toys and products. The Hot Wheels site includes product information, games, downloads, videos, and a collectors' feature for those who collect Hot Wheels cars.

Factory Tag Rides: Players choose a car and use various machines in a factory setting to modify and decorate their car with decals, wheels, paint, and suspension.

Surreal Stunts: Users assemble stunts, obstacles, and track sections to design an original racetrack.

Rebellion Race: Players use speed, handling, and power to win races and unlock faster cars.

Aerial Attack: Robot Swarm: Interactors control an aerial attack vehicle responsible for destroying invading bugs.
