Video Games in the Classroom:
DEVELOPING DIGITAL LITERACIES

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The place of digital culture in children's lives

Popular culture and the digital world are an important part of many children's lives. Computer games, virtual worlds and social networking sites are seamlessly integrated into their everyday work, relationships and play. While the degree and nature of children's involvement varies according to age, interest, opportunity and parental support, by the time they leave primary school, most students will have had significant engagement with popular culture, media and new technologies, including active first hand experience of digital culture and the online world.

The *Digital Beginnings* study (Marsh, Brooks, Hughes, Ritchie, Roberts & Wright 2005) found that young children in the UK live in an environment rich with popular culture, media and ICT. 'They are growing up in a digital world and develop a wide range of skills, knowledge and understanding of this world from birth … engagement with media is generally active, not passive, and promotes play, speaking, listening and reading' (p. 5). In addition, 'The introduction of popular culture, media and/or new technologies into the communications, language and literacy curriculum has a positive effect on the motivation and engagement of children in learning' (p. 6).

In Australia, the Australian Communications and Media Authority researched levels of engagement with digital culture and the online world. This study surveyed the media usage of young people between the ages of 8 and 17 in the year 2007 (ACMA 2008). It explored the media habits of a slightly older age group of primary school-aged children than those in the *Digital Beginnings* study, (children aged 8–11), but like that study found that online engagement was an important part of children's lives. In Australia at that time, the study found that boys and girls aged 8–11 spent an average of 30 minutes on the internet per day (p. 4). Between a quarter and a third of children aged 8–11 had a computer or game console in their bedroom (p. 7) and 24% of the 1000 children in this age group who participated in the survey played online gaming against other players (p. 12). For the group as a whole, they found that:

Three of the top four activities that young people liked to do for fun when by themselves were electronic media–related: watching free television (30%), listening to recorded music (25%), and playing video games (24%) – not including games against other players. The second favourite activity category was 'reading, drawing and writing letters (29%). (ACMA 2008 p. 16)

Given the rapid rate of change, and the growing presence of technology in almost every aspect of our lives, it is highly likely that figures about children's media usage in both countries have increased since then. All of these are good reasons for building digital literacies into the literacy and English curriculum, and for paying attention to the multimodal, digital texts that are part of contemporary children's lives.

Digital culture and literacy in the English curriculum

The Australian Curriculum (English) recognises the need to help students become critical and capable users of digital texts and literacies. Its first aim focuses on the need to ensure that students:

Learn to listen to, read, view, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and multimodal texts across a range of contexts with accuracy fluency and purpose. (ACARA 2011 Rationale/aims np)

This is spelt out in more detail subsequently. Literacy sub strands focus on 'texts in context', interacting with others', interpreting, analysing and evaluating' and 'creating texts'. Texts:

> provide the means for communication. They can be written, spoken or multimodal, and in print or digital online forms. Multimodal texts combine language with other means of communication such as visual images, sound track or spoken word, as in film or computer presentation media. (ACARA 2011 Content-structure np).

Multimodal texts and literacies, in other words, are an important part of contemporary English curriculum. But how should we go about teaching about these? And can the requirement to work in this way, with these forms of text and literacy, help teaching and curriculum connect more strongly with students' lives?

What do video games have to offer to English/ literacy curriculum?

There has been increasing interest recently in exploring ways to bring one of the most popular forms of digital popular culture – video or computer games – into literacy and English curriculum. What might it mean to do so? And why? What sorts of things might the study of video or computer games provide? What might children learn, and learn about, through the study of virtual worlds and video games? There are a number of reasons why games might be part of English with much to offer in a digital English curriculum. Here are a few:

1. New ways of telling stories

Arguably, games present new forms of telling stories. For many children, some of their most satisfying and engaging experiences of narrative, and of the making and playing of stories comes through computer games or their playful involvement with others in online virtual worlds. Narrative-based games, such as quest-based role play games for example, draw on older traditions of telling and making stories, and build on familiar genres and forms. Players need to know quite a lot about stories and about games in order to play. They may need to remember the back-story, for example, know what sort of action and scenarios to expect, and to have a fair idea of what different characters are typically like, and what they do. To do this they need knowledge about the game, and about games and stories that are similar.

2. Text or action?

Games resemble other story telling forms, such as literature or film. But there are significant differences too. Some of these involve children's role as a games player. Their position in relation to the game as both character and reader/player, for example is more complicated than is the case with other forms – or at least, more mixed up! Then there's the fact that they need to do something in order to make the game happen, in interaction with the machine. Many game studies specialists argue that games are not narratives at all, but rather forms of action. If we are going to study games as digital texts, using multimodal literacies, we need to recognise this important argument.

3. Multimodal literacies

I like to think about games as a form of 'multiliteracies in the wild'. They call on all sorts of different elements to make meaning: sound, images, words, actions, symbols, colour and the like, singly or in combination. To make sense of computer games, players need to recognise how all these different elements combine. James Gee argues that understanding the ways combinations like these work is key, 'learning about and coming to appreciate interrelations within and across multiple sign systems … as a complex system is core to the learning' (Gee 2003 p. 49). Other features may include split screens where information is provided in several places at once, as well as in several forms. For example, maps in the top corner may show where the main play is taking place in the games world. Panels on the side or below the 'main' action may show things to buy, use, combine, add or in other ways take into account. Different combinations of characters and weapons will have different effects and results. Working with computer games as part of English provides opportunities for children to explore multimodal literacies, and how many elements work together to create the overall design.

4. Literacy practices, situated play

As they play computer games, alone or with other players, children are involved in a rich range of literacy practices, from reading information in print and digital form, discussing play with friends, working out strategies, reflecting on what happened

and why, negotiating for their next turn, solving problems and so on. Game play takes place in 'real world' contexts and online. Games are an important example of the more social, participatory forms of engagement with texts that are typical of many contemporary forms.

5. Developing critical perspectives

Critical perspectives are about understanding how texts work. This includes identifying the values and assumptions in the text, and also coming to appreciate the ways in which different elements work together to create the overall meaning in combination with what the reader brings. Helping students understand more about the richness of games they enjoy, and how that is created, is as important as coming to these understandings about other kinds of texts, such as poetry or children's literature. So too is becoming more aware of the ways in which texts contribute to how we understand the world and think about things. Attention to values and assumptions, and how these are created and conveyed in multimodal form is important here. The 3D model of l(IT)eracy, (Green 1999; Durrant & Green 2000) where teaching and learning combines critical, cultural and operational dimensions provides an excellent framework for this aspect of English particularly.

6. Creating texts

Creating is an important part of English and literacy learning. The Australian curriculum lays strong emphasis on this area. At level 3, for example, in the Literature strand students are asked to 'create imaginative texts based on characters, settings and events based on students' own and others' cultures using visual features for example perspective, distance and angle'. In the Literacy strand they are asked to:

Plan, draft and publish imaginative, informative and persuasive texts demonstrating increasing control over text
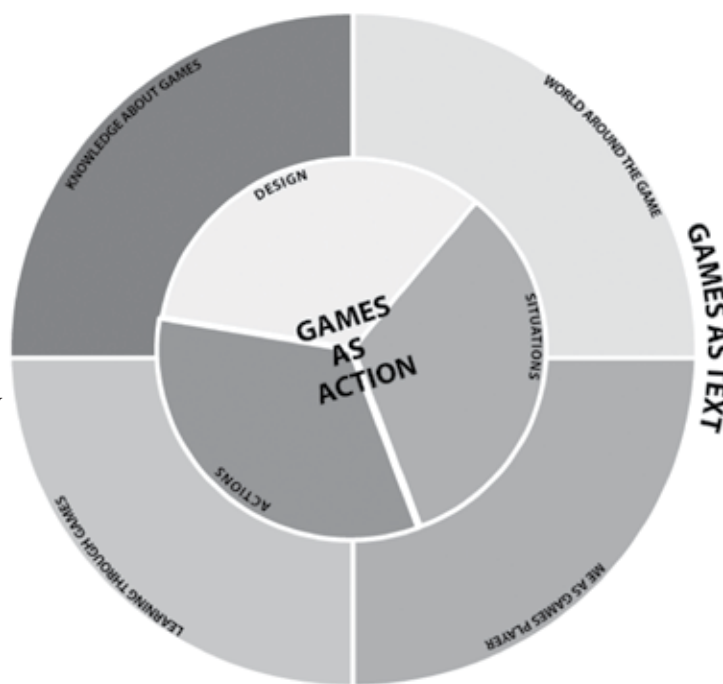

Figure 1: Games as text, games as action: A model for critical games literacy.

structures and language features and selecting print, and multimodal elements appropriate to the audience and purpose. (ACARA, 2011, np)

Whether they imagine what a new character or layer in the game might be through drawing, print or multimodal forms, use game-making software or options for making small animations provided by some games (machinima) to create a new episode, create digital stories or act out a subplot or new adventure in improvised or scripted drama, video games provide rich opportunities for this 'productive' dimension of English and literacy.

A model for critical games literacy

In a study with teachers in a number of Victorian schools, Tom Apperley, Clare Bradford, Joanne O'Mara, Christopher Walsh, Amanda Gutierrez and I explored questions and possibilities in relation to literacy and computer games[1]. As part of that research, combining key ideas from literacy and games studies theory with the classroom work of teachers, we developed a model for thinking about critical games literacy (Figure 1). The model suggests approaches for curriculum planning in English and other subjects and combines the idea of games as text with the idea of games as action.

The two layers of the model, *games as text* and *games and action*, are closely linked, since both layers are needed to reflect the dynamic nature of game play. Curriculum units in English and other subjects built around video need to ensure they cover at least one sector of both the inner and outer layers of the wheel. How this happens in each instance will depend on the nature and focus of the emphasis within the classroom on different areas of the Australian English Curriculum. We hope it provides a useful guide for teaching and learning about multimodal texts and literacies, and for critical reflection, understanding and enjoyment of computer games.

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Note

1 Beavis, C., Bradford, C., O'Mara, J., Walsh, C.: *Literacy in the Digital World of the Twenty First Century: Learning from Computer Games.* Australian Research Council 2007–2009. Industry Partners: The Australian Centre for the Moving Image, The Victorian Association for the Teaching of English, The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, Victoria. Research Fellow: Thomas Apperley, Research Assistant: Amanda Gutierrez. See further Beavis, Apperley, Bradford, O'Mara and Walsh 2009, Beavis, O'Mara and McNeice (in press)

Catherine Beavis's research expertise centres on the changing nature of text and the implications for literacy, education and schooling of young people's engagement with digital culture and the online world. She researches in the areas of English curriculum, pedagogy and assessment; digital culture and computer games; digital literacy and new literacies and games-based learning. She has undertaken numerous research projects focused on English education, and on literacy, digital culture, young people and computer games. Her current Australian Research Council Project is Serious Play: Using digital games in school to promote literacy and learning in the twenty first century (2011–2014).

Professor Catherine Beavis is a keynote speaker at the **2012 ALEA Sydney Conference** to be held at The SMC Conference and Function Centre Goulburn Street, Sydney NSW. Her keynote will consider: *Literature, imagination and computer games*. And her workshop continues the theme: *Building bridges: narrative, literature and computer games* For more details and to register for the conference, go to **www.alea.edu.au.**