Games as Text, Games as Action

VIDEO GAMES IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM

Catherine Beavis

Setting the Scene

What did you enjoy about the game? Give a detailed answer!

I liked the old school retro graphics. The game also gave you the opportunity to do what you wanted to do, such as the directions you wanted to go in and the moves you made during the missions. The game also went into detail on what you had to do and gave you hints along the way.

—David, age 14

I enjoyed the old style graphics and using skills like remembering and thinking ahead. Also using time against you, and choosing right and wrong decisions. Also using teamwork through the class was good so you could hear everyone's opinion

—Jo, age 14

Retro feel (graphics and control)

Had to plan and think your way through situations strategically

Fairly good plot/story line – it made sense and could be a real scenario.

—Richard, age 15

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What did you not enjoy about the game? Give a detailed answer!

This game lacks a good user interface, although finding controls proved a challenge. This became annoying many times for a good game needs to have the following: good graphics, interesting storyline, good character construction, and multiplayer. This game lacks three of the 4.

—Andrew, age 15

You would have to be a very patient man to thoroughly enjoy this game.

—Con, age 14

What's Happening?

David (all names are pseudonyms) and his friends were writing essays titled “The Morality of... *Secret Agent: Mission One*” as part of their religious education class at an all-boys Catholic school. A side-scrolling platform game from 1992, *Secret Agent* asks players to work their way up 16 levels, collecting items and negotiating traps and dangers, until they access the “main fortress” to win the game. The game is set out as a two-dimensional geometric map.

Students had spent two lessons playing this old-style video game as a group, shouting instructions to their teacher, Brian, who was at the front of the class and controlled the game, which was shown on a large-screen monitor. The class had then been asked to examine why this game was so popular 30 years ago and

why they enjoyed it today, too. Follow-up questions included the following: How would this game be different if it was relaunched in 2012? List as many poor moral actions as you can remember from the game. And why was making poor moral choices such fun?

The activity was a prelude to the boys designing and making their own video games, to be based on “making positive moral choices” and made using GameMaker, Powerpoint, GoAnimate, or other suitable software.

What Have Video Games Got to Do With Literacy in the Classroom?

For a number of years, I have been exploring video games as emergent cultural forms: the ways they work as texts, the kinds of literacies on which they call, and what players need to know and do in order to be able to play. In this commentary, I describe a model for working with video games in the English classroom, as well as in other subject areas, in relation to not only new forms of text and literacy but also literacies understood as design. The model provides a way to address textual aspects and recognizes the central importance of action in video games and game play. Games referred to include video games and other forms of digital games: console games, Wii games, phone games, and so on.

Before getting to the model itself, however, I discuss the changing nature of contemporary literacy and the important concept of design. I describe my own developing interest in video games as popular culture, their role in students’ lives, and continuities between popular culture and more traditional literature as part of the spectrum of texts for study in the English classroom. In the second half of the commentary I present the model, developed by Tom Apperley and myself in conjunction with Clare Bradford, Joanne O’Mara, Christopher Walsh, and Amanda Gutierrez, working with high school teachers and students researching literacy in the digital age (Beavis, Apperley, Bradford, O’Mara, & Walsh, 2009). I return to the observations made by David and his mates, and Brian’s unit of work, to illustrate the workings of the model and how it might be applied.

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Games as Popular Culture: Why Work With Video Games?

My fascination with video games grew out of a long-standing interest in literary and aesthetic texts, in both high culture and popular forms, and the ways in which stories are made and told across a range of genres. Working with students and teachers in schools serving low-socioeconomic status and immigrant communities, I had been struck by the enthusiasm and wry understanding many young people brought to “old media” popular culture texts, such as *The Simpsons* or *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. These were the texts of students’ worlds; they were also, on examination, often complex, witty, and multilayered. I was conscious, too, of the pleasure students experienced in watching and talking about these programs and of the social and communal nature of their engagement as they shared moments, mimicked characters, made up their own stories, and swapped jokes with other viewers. I was struck by the reflective critical insights many students developed in relation to programs like these. I could also see that their knowledge and observations of these texts strongly resembled the kinds of understandings and analysis I was trying to foster in relation to more traditional literature.

There are many reasons for bringing popular culture into the classroom, including the opportunity to tap into the evident pleasure and active engagement often entailed, the ability to build bridges between students’ in- and out-of-school lives, and the rich complexity of much popular culture and the ways in which it rewards close study. The International Reading Association (2012) position paper on adolescent literacy argues that adolescents

engage in multiple forms of literacy throughout their day....These literacy experiences may include the use of traditional print materials, the Internet, social media, instant messaging, texting and video games, all of which can be used as tools for academic content as well as forming social relationships. (p. 2)

Students can learn much about how texts work from the study of popular culture, including video games. According to Misson (2006):

The reasons for studying such texts are perhaps different in detail from the reasons for studying *Macbeth*, but they are pretty much in the same areas:

- Knowledge about textuality
- Political awareness of how texts are constructing their readers ideologically
- Better understanding of how the text is engaging its readers. (p. 11)

But it is important, too, to recognize the privileged place popular culture may have in students' lives and to avoid attempting to take it over, turning it into school. We need to recognize and respect what popular culture means in students' lives out of school, that is, that the context of the school is very different from the context of "out of school" and home.

Video Games as Text in the English Classroom: New Textual Forms, Multiliteracies, and Design

As video games gained in popularity in the 1990s, I became increasingly interested in their richness and sophistication, the mix of multimodal elements entailed, and the complex reading practices in which young people were engaged as they read and played. Games, it seemed to me, were dense, multilayered, and intertextual, and they exemplified literacy changing in the direction of design (Kress, 2003; New London Group, 1996). As emergent cultural forms, games embodied new ways of telling and making stories that merged images and words with many other elements and repositioned players as readers and writers, interpreters, and creators. Gee (2003/2008) argued that, in games, "learning about and coming to appreciate interrelations within and across multiple sign systems (images, words, actions, symbols, artefacts etc.) as a complex system is core to the learning experience" (p. 42). This made perfect sense to me. I was struck, too, by the very literary qualities of some games and the imaginative worlds they conjured for reader/players.

Video games seem to exemplify multiliteracies "in the wild" (Beavis, 2013) and the ways in which "literacy" today includes but goes well beyond print and verbal forms. Video games have their own ways of telling stories and presenting challenges, with players taking an active role in bringing those stories into being and meeting those challenges. Games are striking for the often complex and sophisticated nature of the worlds they create and the many different symbol systems or forms of meaning making they call upon to do so. "Reading" or playing video games requires the player to interpret all sorts of different symbol systems—words, pictures, sounds, symbols, color, and so on—simultaneously as well as alone and in combination. Players have to

understand these diverse forms, and the relationships between them, and know what to attend to and how.

Recognizing the logic of many different forms of meaning making (words, symbols, music, movement, and so on), individually and in interaction, is central to contemporary ways of thinking about literacy—the concept of literacy as "design" (New London Group, 1996). The New London Group (1996) proposed six such meaning-making systems or design elements: linguistic, visual, audio, gesture, space, and the combination of these that becomes multimodal. Design, with its double resonance as both noun (the design of the game) and verb (to design a new character), provides a way to think about the mix of literacies that creates most forms of text with which students interact in various ways (what students "read") and about the productive component of work in English and other areas, where creating is an important part of coming to understand and making things one's own.

A Model for Critical Games Literacy

The project "Literacy in the Digital World of the Twenty-First Century" provided the opportunity to work with an interdisciplinary group of colleagues as we explored games in the classroom, with research team members coming from the fields of English, literacy and drama education, children's literature, and games studies. As part of our work, we set out to develop a model for games and literacy that teachers could use as a basis for curriculum planning, pedagogy, and assessment.

It was clear from the outset that video games differed from other forms of text and popular culture in several ways, in particular regarding the relationship of players to the game; where and how the game "took place"; the interaction among players, the game algorithm, and the machine; the ways episodes within the game took place only through players' actions, so that players literally constructed the game as they played; the different iterations of the narrative; and so on. Games might be texts, but they also depended on forms of knowledge right at the boundaries of what might be thought of as literacy. They were as much about action as reading, and they stretched well beyond what we had hitherto thought of in these terms.

A model was needed, we felt, that took account of games understood as both text and action and that recognized the role of games in young people's lives and the situated nature of play. First, we drew

FIGURE 1 *Games as Text, Games as Action* (Apperley & Beavis, 2013, p. 9)

LOW RESOLUTION FIG

on relevant literature in the areas of games studies, literary theory, and new/multimodal and traditional literacies; our work with teachers and our observation and analysis of the units developed to teach with and about digital games; and the teachers' planning processes and reflections. Then we developed a model that combined these areas: the "games as text/games as action" model for critical games literacy (Apperley & Beavis, 2013; Beavis & Apperley, 2012) shown in Figure 1.

The model was envisaged as consisting of two interrelated layers. Although each layer has a distinctive focus, a high level of overlap and commonality exists between the two, particularly in relation to situatedness and design. The model was intended to provide both a map for curriculum planning and pedagogy and a heuristic for observing and analyzing games and play. We envisaged it as a spinning pinwheel, with different sectors in each layer working together or differently depending on the focus of the activity and game. The model illustrates the ways in which games work as both text and action. Although work may initially be focused more in one layer than the other, the model reminds us that both dimensions are integrally

connected, and that activity shown in the model as part of one layer cannot happen without the other.

Games as Text

The Games as Text layer has four sectors: Knowledge About Games, The World Around the Game, Me as Games Player, and Learning Through Games. Within each sector, attention is paid to different emphases within English and literacy education and to the ways in which games might be used across a range of curriculum areas to teach disciplinary knowledge and understandings. The teaching and learning foci envisaged with each sector in the Games as Text layer are outlined in Figure 2.

Games as Action

The Games as Action layer has three sectors: Situations, Actions, and Design. Within each sector, attention is paid to different aspects of game play and the processes in making and playing games. The Games as Action layer addresses game play both in and out of school, and it focuses on the contexts, actions, and decisions needed to create play. Core foci within each sector are outlined in Figure 3.

FIGURE 2 Teaching and Learning Foci: Games as Text

<p>Knowledge About Games</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Narrative structures and features • Generic knowledge • Intertextuality • Ideology • Literacies/multiliteracies in games • How games structure knowledge and participation • Developing critical perspectives on games 	<p>The World Around the Game</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situated contexts for game play • Paratexts • Literacy practices surrounding games • Global contexts for play • Gaming capital • Games and the military entertainment complex
<p>Me as Games Player</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • My involvement as player/reader with the game (including engagement and reflection) • Involvement with other players (in game/out of game) • Physically present/absent, personally known/unknown (includes representation of self and others) • Identity 	<p>Learning Through Games</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning in curriculum areas • Serious games • Learning about learning (including metacognition) • Critiquing games/critical literacy

An Example: “The Morality of...*Secret Agent: Mission One*”

The unit Brian designed asked the boys to play, analyze, and reflect on *Secret Agent: Mission One* and then to use the design knowledge that surfaced through this work to inform the design and making of a new game with a new purpose—to teach about “positive moral choices” as part of the religious education curriculum. In doing so, it provides a good illustration of the different dimensions of the model in action. The unit and the boys’ discussion of their playing of the game illustrate the ways in which the model works to highlight the kinds of knowledge and understanding involved in playing, analyzing,

and making games. Brian’s planning and teaching drew on both layers, creating an integrated curriculum unit that brought together the boys’ knowledge and expectations about the textual aspects of games, the skills required to design their own games, and knowledge particular to the subject (in this case, religious education).

As they played and commented on *Secret Agent: Mission One*, the boys’ work reflected several dimensions of each layer, sometimes alone and sometimes simultaneously. ~~With respect to the Games as Text layer, much discussion centered on understanding the design of the text, particularly in the Knowledge~~

FIGURE 3 Mapping and Playing: Games as Action

	<div>Situations<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Players• Nonplayers• Technologies• Paratexts• Contexts• Status</div>	<div>Design<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Changing the game• Building avatars• Choosing actions• Building objects• Community management• Reflection</div>
	<div>Actions<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Player against computer• Player with computer• Actions in games world• Multimodal literacy• Spatial immersion</div>	

~~About Games sector.~~ Knowledge about games of this kind—qualities such as their generic features, the narrative around which they are organized, and so on—was in evidence as the boys called on their experience and expectations of this game genre and what made a good game more generally. Qualities the boys valued included the need for a good storyline, sophisticated graphics, solid character construction, clear instructions, a clean interface, and the capacity to play in multiplayer mode.

Their comments also addressed areas in the Games as Text layer in the sector Me as Games Player. These included thoughts about their involvement with the game and other players as well as the ways in which they represented themselves as players with particular experience and skills. Their discussion of the context in which they were playing—the classroom and the group—links to the World Around the Game sector and to the Situations sector of the Games as Action layer, showing the interconnectedness of the two. Other elements related to the World Around the Game sector include literacy practices noted as part of play: planning ahead and “thinking your way through situations strategically,” listening to others, and teamwork.

Work undertaken that reflects concerns in the Games as Text layer connects with all three sectors of

the Games as Action layer. In relation to Situations, the boys talked about themselves as players, the context in which they were playing, and the ways in which the available technology shaped and limited the possibilities of *Secret Agent: Mission One*. Although the game was not in multiplayer mode, the boys’ comments showed that group involvement was important, that they enjoyed playing with one another and the collaborative effort involved. With respect to the Actions sector, they wrote about the many actions they took as they played the game: moves chosen, directions taken, choices made, and so on. In describing the ways they played and what they liked (or didn’t like) about the game (for example, the graphic interface), they wrote about design elements of the game. In fact, most of what they did and discussed related to design. In the second half of the unit, students drew on their knowledge of both layers, and of the disciplinary area, to complete the design of their own games.

Why Do It?

Work with *Secret Agent* in the Games as Text layer required the boys to reflect critically on the game and to identify core features that contributed to whether they felt the game was a success. Their analysis of

Secret Agent, and their responses to it, provided the groundwork for their design of their own games. The analysis and discussion activity helped bring to the fore central design elements of games and the ways they work, with critical analysis and reflection linked in turn to the design and making of a new game. The games they designed were intended to support learning in the relevant subject area; hence, there were also elements drawn from the Learning Through Games sector in the curriculum unit Brian designed.

Why bring games into English and language arts curriculum? Isn't there enough to do already? And what will happen to other forms and areas we value if we do? Will games drive out literature? Will multimodal literacies drive out traditional print forms? Of course we must take care that these things do not happen, but much is to be gained in embracing the notion of design and working with it to advance understandings of the rich suite of multiliteracies and multimodal textual forms. Crucially, a design perspective emphasizes active and creative dimensions of work with texts, in which students are makers as well as readers/players/viewers and analysis and understanding are developed across all activities, informing one another as students create new designs, new outcomes, and new ideas. In the case of games, these range from deeper understandings of how games work, for example, through reflections either on how narrative forms or on player positioning, or via the active creation of new texts, whether in print or multimodal form.

In these constraining institutional times, the temptation is to look only backward not forward, but we need not do so. Indeed, as we reimagine English and language arts curricula to engage with the texts and literacies of our times, games occupy an important place as challenging but important hybrid textual forms that are inextricably linked with action; ~~indeed, they are embodiments of multiliteracies~~ ⁴richly intertextual and complex socially situated sites for learning and play. We owe it to ourselves, our subject, and our students to explore.

Note

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More to Explore

CONNECTED CONTENT-BASED RESOURCES

- ✓ An elaborated version of the model can be found at the Learning from Computer Games website: learningfromcomputergames.com/projectOutcomes.html
- ✓ Details about the *Serious Play* project can be found at sites.google.com/a/zagami.info/seriousplay
- ✓ Beavis, C., O'Mara, J., & McNeice, L. (Eds.). (2012). *Digital games: Literacy in action*. Adelaide: Wakefield Press.

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