

English Revisited: Sucker Punch, Moffatt, Avatars and Forensic Evidence

Author

Russell, Jennifer, Beavis, Catherine

Published

2012

Journal Title

English in Australia

Rights statement

© The Author(s) 2012. The attached file is reproduced here in accordance with the copyright policy of the publisher. For information about this journal please refer to the journal's website or contact the author.

Downloaded from

<http://hdl.handle.net/10072/49489>

Link to published version

<https://www.aate.org.au/journals/archive/2010---2014>

Griffith Research Online

<https://research-repository.griffith.edu.au>

English Revisited: Sucker Punch, Moffatt, Avatars and Forensic Evidence

Jennifer Russell, St Mary's College, Adelaide
Catherine Beavis, Griffith University

Abstract: Contemporary curriculum guidelines, such as those provided in the incoming Australian curriculum, call for English to attend to multimodal forms of text and literacy as well as more traditional forms. Students are expected to become capable and critical readers, users and creators of texts and forms of literacy that span everything from newspapers to classic texts to visual art to computer games. How to do so, and what this means for English, is often less clear. In this paper, we describe an English curriculum that was at once literary and multimodal, analytic and creative, and embraced a range of opportunities for students to study and create literary and aesthetic texts in many forms. We discuss the opportunities this presented to connect with the excitement of the contemporary world, and the ways in which longstanding principles and philosophies of good teaching and learning, and the central concerns of English curriculum across time, might be understood and reconstituted in the digital age.

So what's this about then?

What constitutes literary English in the contemporary world? The naming of Literature as one of the three organising strands of the incoming Australian curriculum, set together with the requirement for students to 'learn to listen to, read, view, speak, write, create and reflect on increasingly complex and sophisticated spoken, written and multimodal texts across a growing range of contexts with accuracy, fluency and purpose' (ACARA, n.p.), signal a set of rich directions and possibilities for English teaching and curriculum. While traditional forms of text and literacy remain important, the opportunity is there to open up to multimodal forms, to recognise and connect with digital and non-print textual worlds, and for students to both study and create these. What might English teaching and curriculum look like if they brought together these possibilities?

In this paper, we – Adelaide English teacher Jen Russell, and teacher educator Catherine Beavis – describe an approach that allowed 'extremes' of text, from classic literature through to digital forms, to be studied and created by students within a literary English curriculum. We discuss the ways in which an open and exploratory pedagogical approach, underpinned by a firm grounding in literary metalanguage and analysis, and an informed curiosity on the teacher's part about all manner of contemporary texts, allowed students in a Year 10 English class to experience a version of English that was both digital and literary, creative and analytic, looking back and looking forward, and highly engaging and participatory.

OK. Who's telling me about this?

I, Jen, have a passion for teaching and a passion for empowering students. Increasingly, in recent years, the importance of empowering students has seemed to me to be at the core of

what teachers need to do in this world of endless resources and rapidly changing communication forms and messages. Power, however, I believe is not just found in the ability to analyse and understand. Higher order creative tasks force that understanding to a new level and at the same time open aesthetic doors that lead to innovation, new insights, communication of original ideas, joy and wonder. While I began teaching a version of this course in 2009, it changed markedly each year as I learned to work with increasing levels of student choice and to adapt my pedagogy to the needs of the students rather than just the needs of the course. It also changed with the need to address not only traditional literary material but also to focus on the new media forms that were central to the world experience of the students. To avoid these forms seemed to me to be an abrogation of my role. How could I send students into the world without the wherewithal to 'read' new communication, understand the messages and respond in a flexible manner?

I, Catherine, am a teacher educator with a particular interest in the ways in which English as a school subject is changing in current times, as new media and new forms of literacy become increasingly popular alongside more traditional forms. English as a school subject is centrally concerned with supporting students to become fully literate in print and multimodal literacies, skilled in understanding and using both new and traditional forms of communication. I am interested in the ways in which opportunities to study texts such as films, websites or computer games, as well as more traditional forms such as novels and plays, are incorporated into the curriculum, together with opportunities for forms of text response and analysis that include creative works using visual and digital elements alongside (or instead of) more traditional print forms. For many years, I have been deeply interested in both the teaching of Literature, including classic texts, and in the multimodal, digital texts of young people's out-of-school worlds. In particular, I have been struck repeatedly by the complexity and sophistication of many computer games – now perhaps better collectively called digital games. I have become fascinated by the ways in which narratives are created or unfold, the ways in which players are positioned and invited to play. I am intrigued with the ways in which meaning is carried and created through multiple modes, the high level of skill involved in being able to play, and the participatory and/or complicit nature of play. The situatedness of play, the role of the machine, the often stunning visual aesthetics and sound that are

entailed, are all important here. Collectively, through these and other elements, games seem to be reshaping literary/textual experiences in many young people's worlds. Yet despite what, to me at least, seem essential continuities, it is rare for these two forms – classic literature and computer games – to be seen as part of the same spectrum of texts that might constitute English and Literature teaching in schools.

In mid 2011, Jen contacted me in relation to work one of her students, Erin, was doing in English connecting literature and computer games. Following email discussion, I was fortunate to visit her and her students at her school. In this paper, we write together about Jen's course, comprising teaching and learning principles and approaches that bring together core priorities in the teaching of literature with contemporary and multimodal narrative forms, and present examples of students' creative responses in diverse forms.

You did WHAT?

Jen: It became evident early in the development of the course that we describe here that a comprehensive skill set, and the confidence and independence to use it, is central to student development of analytical strength. Challenging questions and frameworks for sorting analytical response material are also vital. They have to be relevant to all communication forms from the traditional to the latest offering. The requirements for success in the creative domain, however, are harder to pin down because they differ from student to student. I encourage students to use a communication form or forms that they love or find exciting and where possible to use those as vehicles to present their points of view. Each medium comes with sophisticated 'construction parameters' which students know due to their previous immersion in the field or which require investigation. Creative responses also involve more risk taking and are less linear in development than traditional essays.

In order to meet the needs of an academically diverse group of students, there is considerable choice in texts and task responses. At different times, there is whole class, small group and independent learning. When working in small groups or independently, mutual trust ensures that students know that they will be supported every step of the way by their peers and by me. If they get into intellectual or creative difficulties, they know that we will discuss options, work out new pathways to success, or as a last resort, we will negotiate a fall back position that will act as an academic safety net. Discussions are frequent and

intellectually stimulating and 're-jigging' is common in creative tasks due to the need to control the scope of student projects and overcome the inevitable technical challenges. Fallback positions are very rare. Engagement, excitement and delight are common as is the shared pride in achievement.

In 2011, the Year 10 course included a negotiated classic text study, a metalanguage unit covering many diverse texts or text segments, a narrative visual text, *Romeo and Juliet*, the Luhrmann film, and a connected text analysis. For the first part, to establish both the independence required and the ownership of learning, students are offered a list of classic texts with other options available by negotiation. In 2011 choices ranged from Camus's *The Outsider* to Winton's *That Eye the Sky*, the more commonly selected *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, and young adult fiction works for those who were not ready to read complex material. Students may form learning hubs of those who want to study the same text or they may choose to work independently. Those in learning hubs set their own pace and set their own agreed homework. In lesson time they may read aloud or independently. I answer their questions, offer guidance and help with thinking and research, monitor their progress and negotiate a due date for the final essay quite early in the process. It is a defining moment for many students when they have to take ownership of their learning in this way and meet deadlines. They are responsible to each other and make sure that the agreed work or homework is done on time. While the text is being read, I introduce an analysis framework, which is used wholly, or in part to consider every text studied during the year. It covers author, context, target audience, themes, techniques and effect on target audience. Students are supported as they discuss and research their text in order to 'fill in' their analysis table. This becomes the research component of their essay. The set question is holistic in nature and requires students to discuss each area of their research in a quite traditional, formal essay style. Perhaps controversially, I do not take student work home to draft it. Instead, I offer appointments for early morning or after school tutoring in areas where students believe they need support. I look closely at their work and teach skills and concepts that they do not know. We also allocate an editing lesson after the essay is written. In this class time, I assist students with specific queries about style, grammar or word order.

The metalanguage unit, which runs across the whole year level at the same time, was developed in 2009/10

as a *Leading Literacy for School Improvement (LLSI)* project that was funded by the Catholic Education South Australia Literacy team and led by Stephen Kelly, Secondary Literacy Consultant, Senior Years. The main emphasis of the project was developing leadership for contemporary literacy practices using critical theory and pedagogy. The research design was adapted from action research resources developed by Kathy Brady, Pippa Milroy, Brenton Prosser and Robert Hattam for the Redesigning Pedagogies in the North Project, UNISA (see e.g. Sellar and Cormack 2009). In the LLSI project, as Stephen Kelly explained:

Participants were offered a range of resources as theories to frame pedagogical changes in the first 6 months and then in framing a question, were asked to make a commitment to a particular set of strategies. Key influences included the knowledge processes developed by Cope and Kalantzis – multi-literacies, Negotiating the Curriculum 2 thinking emanating out of RPiN [Redesigning Pedagogies in the North], Community of thinking from Harpaz, Productive Pedagogies and Kemmis' notion of critical action research. (Kelly 2012)

The project provided the time and opportunity for several staff members to develop a unit of work that addressed student learning needs that had been identified by teachers at the school. In NAPLAN testing and in examinations, our students had difficulty with comprehension tasks, especially those requiring more sophisticated and higher order thinking skills. They were also very teacher dependent, often asking for multiple drafts to be edited before submitting assessment work. We identified the need for technique recognition, the acquisition of language to describe the technique and the ability to connect technique use to a text creator's purpose and audience. At the same time, we also had new interactive whiteboards and saw this as an opportunity to use contemporary digital technology to enhance our students' learning.

Mastering metalanguage and your own choice of text

At the beginning of the unit, we present students with a pretest of their knowledge of metalanguage terms and their meanings, so that they, and we, can identify their current knowledge. As teachers developing the unit, we reasoned that if students did not understand that creators make deliberate decisions about how they communicate with their audience and that these decisions influence the reader to agree with the creator's point of view, then they would not have the skills to

independently assess the communication. If students did not recognise satire, for example, in written or visual material, they would fail to recognise that the creator was criticising something. If they did not recognise subjectivity, they would not question the view being presented. If they did not see that a creator could pretend to be another person of a different age, gender or ethnicity and write using first person 'I' statements, they would believe that the character and the author were the same person. Technique recognition and the language to explain what the creators had done and why, we believed, would open up a new world of understanding for our students.

Using an interactive whiteboard and a range of texts including the opening sequences of *Jaws* the book and *Jaws* the movie, an interactive version of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* with an explanation of techniques and the Simpsons version of the same poem, we teach students to identify techniques used to create the texts. At the same time we cover some thematic content, style, tone and mood for each piece. Students love the presentation of irony in Ed Byrne's standup comedy in which he criticises Alanis Morissette's song and music clip *Ironic* because her examples are not irony. They enjoy The Chaser's Qantas advertisement parody, Barack Obama's *Yes We Can* campaign material with Will I Am, and The Chaser's *In Due Season* comparison between Obama's articulate speeches and hard to follow, needlessly wordy presentations by then Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd. In classroom sessions, students are presented with a framework model that requires them to define the metalanguage term and explain how and why it is used in the texts presented by the teacher. Students who find learning difficult use the model word for word to springboard and structure their analysis. They insert the definition in the required place, then add a little information connecting the technique use to the themes, by explaining what point of view was communicated through, for example, the satire, or that a bullying tone might alert the reader to the author's criticism of a character's behaviour. More able students adapt the wording of the framework and make it their own. When the overt teaching of the unit is completed the students do a post-test, which is a copy of the pre-test, as a summative assessment. It asks them to match definitions of terms with their name. We found this very important when students asked, 'You mean you want us to learn this?' In past years we had included techniques, concepts and

language that students had felt no need to remember after the task was completed.

To further embed their learning, and to meet the requirements explained on a task sheet, students independently choose, and then defend the suitability of a text for their multimodal supported oral presentation. Initial choices are negotiated with me, to ensure chosen texts have sufficient depth or quality, to check there is enough technique material to justify the time spent, or that the text is not too long for the task.

It is here, in the independently chosen texts, that the strength of this unit becomes evident. Student choices range from music clips such as Paramour's *Brick by Boring Brick* or The Beatles *Let It Be* from Julie Taymor's film to Martin Luther King's *I have a Dream* speech, Paul Keating's *Redfern* speech or Kevin Rudd's *Sorry* speech. They find silent French and Belgian award winning, animated short films such as the quirky and amusing 2009 *Get Out* from film students at ESMA in Montpellier and the beautiful but sad *Father and Daughter* by Michael Dudok de Wit, made in the year 2000. They also use games as text. Students show segments of text, then, using the appropriate meta-language, they present an in depth discussion of how several techniques are used to present the themes or create the mood of their selected work.

One student, Erin, chose the computer game, *Assassin's Creed 11* as her text. *Assassin's Creed 11* is partly set in Florence, in Renaissance times. As Wikipedia describes it:

The frame story is set in the 21st century, with player-controlled protagonist Desmond Miles ... reliv[ing] the genetic memories of ancestral nobleman Ezio Auditore da Firenze, who lived during the Renaissance period of the late 15th century in Italy. The player controls Ezio, who becomes an Assassin after his father and brothers are murdered by a traitor to their family. While controlling Ezio, the player can explore game renditions of Italian cities, regions, and landmarks in open world gameplay. *Assassin's Creed II*'s plot includes the fictional depictions of historical characters including Niccolò Machiavelli and Rodrigo Borgia, later known as Pope Alexander VI. (Wikipedia 2012a)

Catherine: I was excited by the way Erin brought these literary perspectives to the game, and used the game to explore and demonstrate the role of pathos in the story of the game. She begins her discussion of the text following the model provided, word for word. 'The creators used Pathos which is defined as "a quality within a text which evokes or stimulates sympathy in the viewer".' From here, however, she makes the

framework model her own. She goes on with her own analysis, using aspects of the framework but now thinking and writing independently and analytically. 'In applying this technique' she continues:

The creators used emotive language in both the visual and linguistic form to express the emotions of the characters, particularly in this scene. Pathos is shown through the dialogue of Umberto, who is the main speaker against the Auditores. He is presented as a stout, high class man who was a prosecutor and pope of their time making him a man of justice but there is nothing just about this situation. The dialogue spoken by the pope is formal because of his role but the father's pleading is informal and his words are used strongly. The emotive features used by the accused articulate fear and hatred to make the audience feel a sense of prejudice and pity for Ezio. Because the player is Ezio and is controlling his moves and decisions in the game, the player feels a deeper connection to his life and welfare.

The availability of a metalanguage, and the option to use one of the most popular and compelling games of 2011 as her chosen text, allowed Erin to undertake sophisticated analysis of a narrative dear to her heart – a game acclaimed for its imaginative reach and complexity. Her insights into the player's relationship with her avatar, moreover, and the specificity of the emotional intensity this creates, allow her to draw astute and highly independent and creative conclusions of her own.

You've gone beyond graphic fiction and cartoons?

Jen: For the next section of the course – on visual texts – two texts were selected as the focus of study. Students were taken to an exhibition of Tracey Moffatt's narratives at the Art Gallery of South Australia and invited to choose one narrative from the range. Those unable to attend the excursion to the gallery were offered *Requiem for a Beast*, a stunning work of graphic fiction by Matt Ottley. Moffatt challenges her viewers to question what is really happening in the world of her fabricated compositions and by implication in the world around us. By posing threats and exposing characters at risk or causing pain to others, she disturbs her audience's view of the world. The artist invites her viewers to make their own meaning from her work. *Laudanum*, for example, alludes to the debilitating effects of Laudanum, or opium, on nineteenth-century women through a chilling series of black-and-white images of interaction between a haughty and beautiful addicted aristocrat and her unfortunate maid. Students were asked to work out what was happening in the

narratives. Essentially, they were on a quest to find the meaning of their chosen series.

Initially very perplexed, students were encouraged to use a version of the analysis framework to consider their chosen narrative sequence. They took extensive notes on technique, focusing on the constructed settings, framing, characters and their foregrounding or backgrounding, the 'attitude' of the actors in the frames and the focal point of their gaze, the positioning of the audience as either subjective or objective viewer, the emotion and relationships of the characters, colour selection and the degree of saturation, referencing to other communication forms and written text and its role. They were invited to use inferencing skills and to make educated guesses about the content of the frames. Because of the varied nature of student experiences, and Moffatt's encouragement, the post-modern concept of connecting with their own knowledge was encouraged, as was the sharing of ideas and interpretations.

Once they had undertaken their analysis, and the formal research and thinking about their chosen artwork was complete, students were invited to present their understanding of the narratives using a medium of their choice. This freedom resulted in exciting creative presentations, which were again shared with their peers. Higher order creative responses demonstrated students' depth of understanding, the ownership of the original creator's concepts, which were then presented in a new and contemporary context, and the creation of new texts that were highly sophisticated works with new meaning.

Echoing Moffatt's use of juxtaposed sets of related images, Sophie created a PowerPoint presentation as her response. She used photos of male and female catwalk models with superimposed segments from Moffatt's work, *Laudanum*, to comment on the modern day use of models to 'drug' people into a manipulated, controlled, consumerist way of thinking. She saw this as a similar behaviour to the use of Laudanum to drug and control women in the 1800s and she noted the abuse that came from it.

Catherine: Using a different medium, Erin created and filmed a questing narrative based on the game *Runescape* to comment on the same work. To do this, she created a story within the game world, using the games' architecture and landscape but bypassing the major narrative of the game. This task required her to first envisage what her own metaphoric story might be,

and the episodes through which it would unfold. She then needed to design and create four avatars, envisage a set of locations within which each episode would take place, and work out in detail what each interaction within these episodes would be. She needed to imagine and create everything from dialogue to sound, time and music and the moves each character would make, and to find ways to bypass in-built elements of the game, such as 'non-player characters', and incidental hazards during play. Using several computers, and working over a period of weeks, she played and filmed the in-game narrative and presented her recorded version to the class.



Figure 1: 'First I must speak to Tracey Moffatt to help me begin my quest'.

In Erin's response, a central character, Laud, went on a quest to find the meaning of Moffatt's artwork. Underscored by music and with dialogue in text form, she moved from place to place in a gaming world where she questioned other created characters including Tracey Moffatt. At times, the environment was visually frightening, with Laud or the 'person' operating her making risky game decisions in which she could be trapped. With the maid's help, Laud eventually came to her own conclusion, which was also Erin's, that due to the drug, the mistress could not differentiate between fantasy and reality. The maid and the mistress's treatment of her were figments of a dependent, drug-addled brain. The mistress had become a victim of medicine that was used to treat depression.

Erin explained:

I chose to present my interpretation of Tracey Moffatt's *Laudanum* using *Runescape* because I wanted to create my perspective of the art series in a visual way. When doing

so, I focused on how the drug, Laudanum, affects the mistress in Moffatt's story and how it works in real life. I wasn't able to present the drug as a prop due to the limitations of materials in the game so I created a new character, adding to the story of *Laudanum*. The four characters I designed each played a significant part in Moffatt's original artwork. The maid and the mistress, who are the main characters of Moffatt's story, were presented in mine as keys to 'finding the meaning behind the art piece, *Laudanum*'. The mistress in Moffatt's version appeared to me as a powerful woman who desired control over others. I designed her costume to express her wealth and gave her a magic staff to show her supremacy. The maid looked poor and useless compared to the mistress, so I gave her dull clothes and an apron to portray these characteristics. It was harder designing for my characters of both Tracey Moffatt and the drug, Laudanum because they didn't play a role in the original artwork. I designed Tracey Moffatt's character after researching the artist and her work to gain a better understanding of her personality. So with limited options, I created my presumption of Tracey Moffatt – alternative and insightful. When designing Laud's character, I wanted to create the aspect of a newcomer in the game, which was portrayed through her costume. The reason I chose Laud as a female character was because the drug was consumed by the mistress therefore, connected to her.



Figure 2: 'I'm Laud. I've come here for your help.'

Jen: Sigourney and Georgia also chose *Laudanum* as the focus of their response. They created a series of large, black-and-white photos, set in a cubby house. They compared the crippling use of Laudanum in the artwork to the abuse of a teenager using social media in 2011. Paddington Bear, 'This bear belongs to' tags were attached to the photos. The names on the tags were the abuse terms used to denigrate young people. The bear reflected the degree of suffering.



Figure 3: Nobody

Krystal chose Moffatt's *Something More*. She created an installation which was a suitcase of evidence, supposedly collected by a forensic team. Using the forensic evidence style she bagged, tagged and annotated a series of reports and samples that led to her conclusion about what happened to the young woman in Moffatt's *Something More* narrative.



Figure 4: Installation – Forensic Evidence

Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*

For the next section of the course, we focused on Luhrmann's *Romeo and Juliet*. We studied it as a postmodern, multilayered film text as well as an adaptation of Shakespeare's play. In preparation for exams, all students wrote a traditional, formal essay in response. Once this was completed, their second task was to undertake a research and presentation task – which became our most interesting exploration. Again working independently, students were free to negotiate a response that showed their in-depth investigation of an aspect of the text. Several students chose to compare

two or three Youtube sourced film versions of the same segment of the text. They considered a ballet performance from early 2000, George Cukor's 1936 offering, Franco Zeffirelli's 1968 version and Kelly Asbury's *Gnomeo and Juliet*, and they compared their selection with Luhrmann's work. The comparison highlighted differences in audience, directorial concept and interpretation of character as a result of 'clues' in the written text. Students analysed the importance of the context in which the films were made. The pre-war, 1936 version, for example, omitted the references to 'What's in a name?' and Georgia wondered how the historical situation of the time influenced this decision. Kiara considered the use of non-verbal communication in Luhrmann's text. To do so, she analysed segments of old silent films such as Chaplin's *The Lion's Cage*, *Mr Bean at the swimming pool* and *Pingu*, and compared the techniques used in these 'silent' films with those employed by Luhrmann to support audience understanding of his text.

Rui Qi made a powerpoint presentation comparing the Luhrmann and Zeffirelli films. Focusing on costume, she identified key features, posited reasons for costume choice, discussed the tonal and associative qualities in each case and explored the metaphoric and symbolic work that they achieved. Her concluding slide summarised the associations attaching to Juliet's ball costume in each film.

Comparison of the Juliets	
Baz Luhrmann's	Franco Zeffirelli's
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> White angel costume <input type="checkbox"/> Innocent <input type="checkbox"/> Love <input type="checkbox"/> Hope <input type="checkbox"/> Pure <input type="checkbox"/> Naïve <input type="checkbox"/> Simple costume <input type="checkbox"/> Straightforward <input type="checkbox"/> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Bright red colour, like a burning light <input type="checkbox"/> "She doth teach the torches to burn bright!"- Romeo <input type="checkbox"/> Simple designs <input type="checkbox"/> Straightforward

Figure 5: Costume choices in *Romeo and Juliet*

Indianna wrote a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet* – a long and gripping narrative that referenced the original closely and insightfully. The whole class was spellbound when she read it out. In it both Romeo and Juliet are secretly seeking to destroy each other while supposedly falling in love. Every step along the way to their final destination, their behaviour and fate has been plotted by their families with a view to taking over their opponents' wealth and power:

'You don't get it, do you? We've been screwed over. Juliet never loved me, she had the same plan all along. The Capulets had the same idea, Balth. They had THE SAME IDEA!' Romeo stood and kicked over the coffee table, letting his beer smash on the floor. 'I can't believe we didn't think of this! All this time I thought she was stupid, but she's just been playing me. She thinks I'm the stupid one! She didn't oppose a pre-nup because it worked perfectly for her. She was planning to kill me, just like I was planning to kill her.'

Catherine: Erin again turned to computer games to create her *Romeo and Juliet* response. To do so she used *Minecraft* – 'a sandbox-building independent video game, focused on creativity and building, allowing players to build constructions out of textured cubes in a 3D world' (Wikipedia (b) 2012) – to build a metaphoric world based around the church. In it, the seasons changed with Romeo and Juliet's fortunes, moving from spring and summer through to winter at the altar. The central aisle was a 'stream of life' with water running under a glass surface. Below the chapel there were two crypts, one on either side, to replicate the tradition that wedding guests sit on opposite sides of a church. Each crypt had metaphoric representations of the character and signposted 'train lines' through which the game 'player' could move. These signposts added to the player's understanding of the text and supported Erin's communication of her understanding.

At last, normal English – or is it?

Jen: The last focus for the course was a comparative text task. Each student negotiated one compulsory, high quality written text from a list of potential texts and library recommendations provided as a guide. The second text could be in any form or medium but had to connect with the first through common themes. After using their frameworks for each text to guide their comparative analysis, students were asked to create a formal essay. Selected texts included Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and *Apocalypse Now* by Francis Ford Coppola, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and Mona Achache's film version of *The Hedgehog*, and Jane Austen's *Emma* and Amy Heckerling's *Clueless*. Erin compared William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* with the *Infamous* series of computer games created by the Sucker Punch team.

In *Infamous 2*, Sucker Punch creators use symbolism and choice of the player to communicate their point of view on the theme of good vs evil. The developers of *Infamous* present good and evil through a choice of a karmic path with two alternative endings, one where humanity is saved and the other resulting in the death

of millions and survival of some. The player recognises the nature of the pathways through the symbolic use of costuming. This is mainly evident in the attire worn by the main character, Cole, as he wears bright clothes of blue and white when good karmic paths are chosen. The evil path is shown through the sinister colours of red and black to portray Cole's dark nature. The filters that the creators chose to overlay the bleak city indicate the impending consequence of the player's choice.

In comparison to *Infamous*, the choice between good and evil and how it impacts humanity is evident throughout Golding's *Lord of the Flies* in different ways. Golding portrays the rise and fall of the isolated civilisation, which is then destroyed by the savage instincts of those who compose it. Golding uses irony to express his point of view on the two karmic paths through the arrival of a naval officer and the death of Simon and Piggy, noting that civilisation and savagery are closely related. This is evident, for example, in the boys' appalling savagery that results in their rescue by a civilised man who engages in warfare. Like the creators of *Infamous*, Golding's use of symbolism clearly communicates his point of view on the theme of good vs. evil. He uses the main characters, Ralph and Jack, as representatives of good and evil and their associated karmic destiny. In relation to *Infamous 2*, the player's decision impacts on the civilisation in the gaming world. Sucker Punch developers portray the salvation of humanity as the individual's choice by giving the player a decision between the right and wrong karmic paths. The creators of both texts, although using different techniques, still strongly convey their perspective on the theme of good vs evil to communicate the same fundamental idea.

You mean we can teach like this and still address the requirements of ACARA?

Catherine: In their 2007 publication, *Rethinking English in Schools*, Ellis, Fox and Street highlight what they describe as 'critical aspects of the problem of English in schools'. These include charges that 'what counts' as knowledge in English 'is determined elsewhere by other people and then delivered' in schools. Second, they speak of a 'disjuncture between the cultural meaning-making practices of children and young people and their lives outside school and subject English as it is enacted in [the] classroom'. Third, they identify 'a marginalisation of the aesthetic as a uniquely important way of knowing that draws its power from the integration of the cognitive and the affective' and

finally 'the way in which the ideological content of subject English – that which has the capacity to engage students and give it a socially critical purpose – has become so easy and in some cases necessary to avoid.' (p. 4).

It seems to us that the approaches and opportunities made possible for students in this Year 10 English class provide examples of how English might move beyond 'critical aspects' such as these, and of how a curriculum that encompasses both classic and contemporary texts in a range of modes, coupled with a pedagogy and set of classroom relationships that encourage exploration, self-reliance, a sense of worth and the experience of trust, might provide a counter or mirror image to these all too frequent concerns. The course let students be makers as well as readers, combined analysis and creativity, tapped into contemporary forms and connected with students' worlds. In this, it echoed Bellis, Doecke and Parr's (2007) call for 'an approach to literary texts that is firmly grounded in social relationships within any classroom, enabling children and adolescents to engage in productive, imaginative play' (p. 165). Students learnt to recognise and use traditional disciplinary knowledge, but always in a context where that knowledge was put to some purpose, whether the exploration and analysis of new and unknown texts, or in the creation of their own. Classic texts sat alongside contemporary multimodal forms. In this classroom, there was an openness to multimodal and digital forms, and a delight in them, combined with the best of traditional literary approaches – those elements of English's heritage and identity remain central to the subject's identity in what Green describes as 'a literacy project of our own' (Green, 2002).

This Year 10 English class, and the work the students produced, is worth talking about not just because the students produced exciting and satisfying work, and felt exhilarated by the experience of making and exploring texts within this literary version of curriculum. The broader issue, and one that will determine to a considerable degree what happens in this country to English teaching and curriculum over the next ten years, is the way in which the possibilities implicit in an English curriculum were combined, to bring together classic and digital worlds. Amidst concerns that the *Australian*

Curriculum: English (ACARA, 2010) will issue in a time of narrowly conservative interpretations of English, out of touch with the contemporary world, it serves as a reminder that this need not be. The opportunities are there to work with broad definitions of literature and text, to address both print and digital forms of literacy, to connect with students' worlds and develop new and open pedagogies of imagination, creativity and play. We should seize such opportunities where we can, and create powerful and engaging English for our students in contemporary times.

References

- Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (2010). *The Australian Curriculum: English* <http://www.australiancurriculum.edu.au/English/> accessed 1 February 2012
- Bellis, N., Parr, G. and Doecke, B. (2007). The Making of Literature: A Continuing Conversation. *Changing English*, 16(2), 165–179
- Ellis, V., Fox, S. & Street, B. (Eds) (2007). *Rethinking English in Schools*. London, Continuum.
- Green, B. (2002). A literacy project of our own? *English in Australia*, 134, 25–32
- Kelly, S. (2012). Email communication 1 Feb 2012
- Sellar, S. & Cormack, P. (2009). Redesigning pedagogies in middle years classrooms: challenges for teachers working with disadvantaged students. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 17(2), 123–139
- Wikipedia (2012a): Assassin's Creed II http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assassin%27s_Creed_II#Synopsis accessed 1 February 2012
- Wikipedia (2012b): Minecraft. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minecraft> accessed 1 February 2012

Jennifer Russell is a teacher of English and Drama at St Mary's College, Adelaide. In a multicultural environment, she teaches students of mixed ability and diverse interests. Her focus is in developing student ownership of learning, engagement with traditional and new curriculum material and pride in collaborative and individual successes.

Catherine Beavis is Professor of Education at Griffith University. She researches in the area of digital culture, young people and new media, with a particular focus on the changing nature of text and literacy, and the implications of young people's experience of the online world for English and literacy education.

