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**'Experts on the field': redefining literacy boundaries.**

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***Games, literacy and identity in the classroom***

Students' experiences of digital culture and the online world are in many ways a constant if invisible presence in the classroom. The significance for curriculum of researching digital literacies, participation and online culture lies not just in learning about 'new' forms of text and literacy, literacy and learning practices and design that communication in the digital world entails, but also in learning about the ways in which young people are engaged and shaped by participating in these worlds, and thinking through the implications of this immersion more broadly for what we might need to teach, and they to learn. In part this concerns the kinds of expectations about texts, participation and literacy that students' experience of online digital culture and communication entails, and the ways their expectations and understanding of what reading, making and participating in texts and utilising literacies might be, in part the ways in which meanings are made that draw on a mix of on and offline texts, media and forms of knowledge, in part, it the ways in which issues of authority, identity and relationships are configured across and between students' on and off line worlds.

This project<sup>1</sup> has entailed cooperative work with teachers across a range of schools, exploring many aspects online literacies and digital cultures, centred around computer games. In this paper we focus on the work of two teachers, Mark and Joel, working in an all boys Catholic High School. We describe their research and classroom projects focussing on different aspects of (computer) games-based digital texts and culture, and some of the questions these raise about digital culture, literacy and curriculum. The first teacher, Joel, capitalised on his students' avid engagement with the AFL game *SuperCoach* to explore convergences between different media forms, the ways in which players drew on data from multiple sources and their own judgements to play the game, and the ways in which their 'real world' relationships were shaped and mediated by their demonstrated expertise and the authority they drew from their proficiency with the game. The second teacher, Mark, took a two-pronged approach with his year 9 students to analyse and reflect on computer games and how they were played. The first set of activities provided the opportunity to observe a younger player, eight year old Jonathon,

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<sup>1</sup> Beavis, C., Bradford, C. O'Mara, J. and Walsh, C.S.: *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: T. Apperley, Research Assistant: Amanda Guterrez

to recall on their own memories of earlier games play, to discuss the game involved (*The Simpsons Hit and Run*, Vivendi 2003) and what Jonathon was doing as he played – all this with a view to gaining greater purchase and perspective on the ways in which games were pitched to different audiences and how this is done. A second set of activities required students to compare and analyse screen shots and other images from four sources: *Grand Theft Auto 4* (Rockstar North 2008), *The Simpsons Hit and Run*, and photos and written accounts from newspapers of parallel instances from crime scenes and gangland wars.

### ***The Herald Sun AFL Supercoach: Literacy, Paratexts and Expertise***

Joel teaches English and Media studies. He selected his year 11 media studies class for this unit of work, which was completed during the second term of the school year. As the school is an all boys' school, the class comprised of male students in the age range of 16-17. Joel's unit of work revolved around investigating notions of convergence (Jenkins, 2006), and included asking the students to play *SuperCoach*, and discuss the links between other media sources and the ways these merged to influence their decisions in the game. He began the unit by looking at elements of control over students' access to and use of media products, and followed this by watching an episode of *Summer Heights High*. From here he discussed with the students their thoughts about new media and how this media is influencing adolescents' lives. This led into discussion about online communities, with the analysis of several *You Tube* clips. As the school is an all boys' school and as Joel said is a very 'blokey' school, he chose to look more closely at online communities and convergence through the AFL *SuperCoach* game. He asked the students to reflect on the kinds of skills they were forming through the use of this game and the ways they participated in the online game and the various media sources that were converging to create a particular online AFL game community. Joel was also interested in how the identity constructed online is not necessarily linked or indicative of the students' physical body, in that the student may not participate in sport themselves, but rather use *SuperCoach* as a viable replacement of the physical sporting experience. So the *SuperCoach* unit acted as a way to launch an investigation into notions of identity and virtual worlds. Students produced short written pieces and extended analysis pieces as they reflected on these elements.

#### ***What is 'The Herald Sun TAC SuperCoach Fantasy AFL' game.***

The Herald Sun TAC *SuperCoach* Fantasy AFL game is a game in which the players (in this case the students) attempt to take the role of a coach. The creators of the game suggest that "**Herald Sun TAC SuperCoach** is easy to play but difficult to master" (<http://supercoach.heraldsun.com.au/>). The ease of play can be seen in the fact that the controls are relatively simple. All that is physically required of the player is to create and name a football squad of 30, with 22 on the field, from a list of football players currently on an AFL team in the year of playing, with the aim of creating the ultimate team and becoming the 'SuperCoach'. The only real confine is that the team created has a salary cap and the cost of each player varies depending on his statistics from previous real world games/seasons. The suggestion that the game is difficult to master is due to the convergence with the real world of the game, and the need to be not only AFL literate, but also well read across all media sources surrounding the game. The end of the virtual

season concurs with the end of the real life season, with the overall winning coach attaining the status of 'SuperCoach' with their friends as well as winning cash prizes. As the website states "While success will earn you bragging rights over friends and colleagues, you'll also be in the running for great cash prizes. The highest-scoring SuperCoach each week will win \$1,000. The overall winner picks up \$30,000." (<http://supercoach.heraldsun.com.au/>).

This game makes no attempt to create a world in which students can perform actions with simulated players (or avatars). This is left to the playstation AFL games that are released each season. Instead it is a game that focuses purely on the management side of AFL, the challenge is to become the overall *SuperCoach*, and the actions performed by the player is the selection of AFL players and their positions on the field. In this respect, the game is *not* a sports computer 'game' as it does not fit classic notions of 'game' and 'play' (eg Huizenga 1950) As one student, Jason, said, SuperCoach 'is not a game...[it's] a competition more than a game. Not fun. It's serious.'

The students in Joel' class were not only immersed in the virtual game, but were immersed in all aspects of the game. They positioned themselves in relation to their 'coaching' abilities which related to their knowledge of the 'virtual' world of the game, but also the 'real' world of the game. Students were involved in processes of creation and consumption of what Consalvo (2007) terms 'gaming capital' – an adaptation of Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984), and a concept that has provided a generative framework within the project for conceptualising important aspects of game play (see eg. Walsh and Apperley 2008). As Consalvo describes it, gaming capital provides:

a key way to understand how individuals interact with games, information about games and the games industry, and other games players. The term is useful because it suggests a currency that is by necessity dynamic – changing over time and across types of players or games.... knowledge, experience and positioning help shape gaming capital for a particular player and in turn that player helps shape the future of the [games] industry.... Players themselves further shape gaming capital, especially as new media forms offer individuals more opportunities to share and the games world grows even larger. (Consalvo (2007) p.4

As Consalvo notes, 'Games aren't designed, marketed, or played in a cultural vacuum.' (2007, p. 4), which is clearly apparent when discussing with students their immersion in the game and the world around it. The virtual 'game', for the students' interviewed in this study, influenced their relationships with peers, their family, other students in the school, and their teachers as they played with and against these other 'coaches' in their daily lives. The students not only had teams in the larger 'Victorian' league consisting of approximately 200,000 teams, but had also set up a competition just for the school, and a competition against their teachers. So in essence these students had multiple teams for each 'field' of their lives. This allowed them to create their own 'football identity' for each social group they associated themselves with.

Taking on the role of coach allowed students to take up positions of expertise and authority in relation both to football and their peers. The role of a 'professional' coach, rather than just supporter, provided them with the chance to experiment with the 'expert' knowledge needed in that profession, and the status that it affords one in society, or in their own social groups that they had formed. For some it afforded them an authority over those who would usually control the power, particularly their teachers and older 'known' participants such as parents, as they advanced higher in the game, and demonstrated more control over the gaming capital than these traditional authoritative groups. It meant distancing oneself from allegiances to particular teams, and instead attempting to position oneself as a follower and objective judge of 'players' rather than 'teams'. Some students, such as Jason and Kevin, mastered the language of this field of knowledge and were so integrated into the *SuperCoach* world during the months of the AFL season, that their social group regarded them as game experts. Whenever Kevin's stepped into the social identity of the role of 'coach' he drew on the linguistic devices and language that would commonly be seen in interviews with coaches before and after the games. For Kevin, the virtual game and the real game were his passion, even though, as one of the other students commented, he did not 'play the game' in real life. But he did not need to 'play the game' in real life to be an expert on the 'field', and even with the real game and other professional sports, it appears a professional coach does not need to have been a 'legend' on the physical field, but be an expert on how to best play the game, know the players and position them to win games. This game allows those who may not be able to master the real game to become experts on the field in a way that allows them to have a sense of achievement and feel deeply connected to the real game.

The reason Kevin was seen as the expert, the person the other students and teachers went to for advice, was due to his control over the converging paratexts (Genette 1997, Consalvo, 2007) surrounding the virtual and real game. Paratexts, as Chris Walsh and Tom Apperley will discuss in greater detail later in the symposium, in this context refer to 'communication and artefacts relating to [a game, that] spring up like mushrooms' around it (Consalvo 2007 p.8). Playing *SuperCoach* relies heavily on the intertextual traversing of such texts. To become an expert of the AFL *SuperCoach* game one needs to not only know how to access the various paratexts surrounding the game, but also critically judge the paratexts. As one student said when asked about making choices about reliable sources from the paratexts available:

[I go with] whoever I think has the more valid... whoever I valued their opinion more. I suppose certain people like Sam Newman he tends to know not that much compared to someone like who's an actual expert like a columnist or something. Their background, like their background of the game, most experienced within the game I'll probably value more. (Kevin)

Students' need to have skills that extend beyond the basic literacy required to simply decode textual material from sources such as *The Herald Sun* and *The Footy Show*. They also need to be critically literate to make judgements about the purpose of each paratext, any underlying biases the 'expert' commentators may have and the possible reasons. They need to be able to synthesis material from a vast array of sources and genres, ask

questions of the texts and make their own judgements about the opinions they receive. The more developed their skills are in relation to this, the better their chances of success.

The paratexts surrounding this game extend beyond regular media sources surrounding the real game. The popularity of *SuperCoach* has become so large that there are now columns specifically written for the game in the Herald Sun by experts such as Kevin Sheedy, the well regarded ex-Coach of Essendon whose 'real' expert status as a Coach is further compounded by the release of the video game *Kevin Sheedy Coach* (Acclaim Entertainment 2002), a radio show dedicated to discussing the statistics of the players, and websites. On top of this the students create their own paratexts as they contribute to other online activities such as blogs and forums. This ties directly into Consalvo's (2007) notion of the way gaming capital functions, "All of that knowledge, experience, and positioning helps shape gaming capital for a particular player, and in turn that player helps shape the future of the industry." (p 4). There is a symbiotic relationship between the *SuperCoach* player and the paratexts surrounding them. The more engaged and involved the players become with the consumption and contribution to the paratexts, the closer they come to being able to fully engage and be regarded by others as an 'expert' coach in the game. Thus allowing them to feel a sense of achievement at succeeding in mastering the role of coach.

### ***The Simpsons Hit and Run, Grand Theft Auto: Analysis and Reflexivity***

Mark undertook a series of activities with his year 9 class, aimed at encouraging reflection and analysis of various dimensions of console games. The first segment of the unit asked students to watch a younger boy, (Jonathon, aged 8) playing *The Simpsons Hit and Run*, on a small screen on a play station 2 on top of the dressing table in his parents' bedroom at home. Students were asked such questions as 'what aspects of Jonathon's game play are similar/different to yours?', 'why isn't Jonathon concerned with the small screen?' and 'what challenges does game play pose to Jonathon?'. They were invited to observe his body language, to comment on his skills and knowledge and on physical aspects of his game play; to discuss the role of elements such as camera angle and sound in contributing to the pleasure and atmosphere of the game, and whether and in what ways the game worked as violent or funny. Analysis of Jonathon's play was a springboard to reflecting on their own games skills, knowledge and histories. They were asked to make comparisons with themselves as younger players - what they knew then and what appealed to them at that time, in comparison to what and how they played currently; what skills they had learned playing games, whether console games 'helped you in some ways with your ability as a student' and to outline how they would 'teach a 6-7 year old to play *The Simpsons Hit and Run*'. They were also asked to read and comment on an online review of the game. In the second activity, images from *Grand Theft Auto IV* were juxtaposed against shots of parallel scenes from television and print media reportage of similar events, which students were asked to analyse in detail. In order to do so, students needed similarly to draw on pre-existing textual knowledge, with questions designed to develop their capacity to identify specific elements and their effect, including camera angle, characterisation, composition, cross referencing to related texts and so on. By combining *The Simpsons Hit and Run*, a game for younger players featuring universally known characters, and based on the more 'adult' but similarly well

known *Grand Theft Auto III*, with analysis of images and screen shots from the recently released *Grand Theft Auto IV*, the unit provided a context to explore such factors as the appeal of games and game playing and how that changed according to age; the kinds of knowledge and understandings that needed to be utilised to play games; features of genre and form; intertextual referencing within and across platforms and generic forms; industry and marketing dimensions, the interpellation of young players, semiotic analysis, and discussions about representation, representational violence, and the violence/effects debate.

### ***Experts in the field***

For students such as Jason and Kevin, games function as sites for exploration and 'serious play' - the establishment of authority, status and relationships amongst their peers and in the world of the game. For Mark's students, shared memories and experiences of *The Simpsons Hit and Run*, and of *The Simpsons* TV show, and their knowledge of discourses, narratives and images of crime and violence in games like GTA, provided a common context Mark could draw on in curriculum designed to help students become more critical and reflective about the construction and appeal of games and the ways they position players.

Students' playing of *SuperCoach* provides a compelling instance of convergence of on and offline worlds, media convergence and the need for students to be adept in reading, bringing together and analysing information presented in a variety of forms, from a variety of sources. Playing the game has material effects on students' sense of self, the ways they manage information, knowledge and authority, their relationships in the real world, and the seamless integration of technology into their everyday lives. The expertise they establish through playing *SuperCoach* is knitted into the ways they interact with each other and others who do and do not play the game, and is highly valued. In order to 'win' they need to develop the capacity for detached evaluation of players and games, in a context where football is an integral part of Melbourne culture, and passionate attachment to teams and players is the norm. In a city where 'play' encompasses not only *SuperCoach*, the online game, but also the actual AFL games on ovals around Australia on a weekly basis and the teasing kind of role play Kevin's comment exemplifies, the seamless integration of on and offline stances and expertise into everyday friendships and the realities of the classroom world point up the degree to which game play becomes part of the building of relationships and identities that play a major role in teenagers' lives in these years. In observing Jonathon's play of *The Simpson's Hit and Run*, and in reflecting on their own past and present game playing practices and preferences, Mark's students wove together their experiences of *The Simpsons* in multiple forms, and on their intertextual experiences of related computer games.

*SuperCoach*, and the playing of it, exemplifies a range of new and traditional texts, literacies texts and literacy practices, in relation both to the mastery of 'paratexts' necessary to play the game and in the new texts students created as they did so. To succeed, to become 'expert', players need to draw on texts from across a range of media, and to read information presented in a wide range of representations, ranging from the somewhat dubious TV commentary of *The Footy Show* through to statistical accounts of

different players' performance in each week's play. In a game where play depends literally and extensively on what happens in both on and offline contexts, where players need to be literate in multiple ways and read across multiple text types and media; Lemke's observations of the nature of online reading seems particularly apt: 'You can't really get at the meaning of various forms piecemeal: you have to integrate the text with its fellow travellers, cross-contextualising them by one another, to get at the kinds of meanings being made and stored' (Lemke 2007, cited in Alverman 2008 p.15).

A central challenge for literacy research and literacy and English education is to understand the ways meaning is made across traditional and digital literacies, in ways that avoid hard and fast boundaries distinguishing off from online forms, or of the ways in which meaning is made in the cross flow between them. As Alverman notes:

Communication through images, sounds and digital media, when combined with print literacy may be changing the way we read certain kinds of texts, but online and offline literacies are not polar opposites. To reify distinctions between them serves mainly to limit understandings of how each informs the other (Alverman 2008 p.16)

Luke Freebody and Land (2000) describe contemporary literacies as 'the flexible and sustained mastery of a repertoire of practices with the texts of traditional and new communications technologies via spoken language, print and multimedia'. The literacy required to play *SuperCoach* includes but entails more than simply decoding textual material from sources such as *The Herald Sun* and *The Footy Show*. Students also need to be critically literate to make judgements about the purpose of each paratext, any underlying biases the 'expert' commentators may have and the possible reasons. They need to be able to synthesis material from a vast array of sources and genres, ask questions of the texts and make their own judgements about the opinions they receive. The more developed their skills are in relation to this, the better their chances of success. Playing the game thus shows or develops a set of literacy practices that include the capacity to read across media, read information presented in different forms (print, visual, statistics, aural etc), evaluate material that is or maybe heavily invested in other issues (eg *The Footy Show*, reportage of individual players, the parade of media commentary and 'expertise'), to interpret and translate this information into play, and to constantly modify and reappraise in the light of new information. It requires sustained attention to multiple factors over an extended period of time, and is both a compelling example of situated literacy practice with real world consequences and of the fluidity of game play, literacies and identity across on and offline worlds.

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