

## **Video games in the literacy classroom**

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### **Abstract**

This aim of this paper is to outline the theoretical perspectives that will shape my upcoming research into the critical study of video games in the English classroom. It will begin by highlighting the changing textual world in which young people now interact, focussing in particular on digital and electronic practices such as videogames. Secondly, videogames are explored as a means to build schooling on better principals of learning and teaching. Thirdly, the way in which videogames encourage identity work, both reinforcing and challenging dispositions is discussed, with specific reference to the work of Bourdieu and Foucault. Their work is used to highlight the way that videogames are as implicated in normalising particular constructions of gender. Fourthly, critical pedagogies are introduced as a means to open up classrooms to new and resistant practices which encourage the problematising of knowledge. Finally, the relationship between game-playing and story-building is developed with Bakhtin's ideas on the chronotype used to address the new ways in which young people construct narratives. The paper concludes with an identification of numerous methodological issues associated with my research, all of which typify the challenges of a Doctoral student new to the field of educational research.

### **Introduction**

This generation's textual practices are vastly different to those of their parents or grandparents. The proliferation of technological devices throughout late-capitalist society is often celebrated for its positive benefits throughout most spheres of our lives. However, some of the most ubiquitous devices require more critical attention. Videogames represent one such device which is more often than not enjoyed uncritically. Whilst teachers go to great lengths to build understandings associated with novels, plays, films and newspapers, the text which dominant teenagers' lives are too often ignored resulting in uncritical mass-consumption. There is a gap in educational research to explain the impact videogame-playing is having on how young people conceptualise narratives and the implicated practices of gender and identity. If educational research is to 'make a difference' then it must address the impact and potential of all text-types, whether they are currently legitimised in classrooms or not.

### **Videogames and Young People**

It is difficult to ignore the impact of new digital devices and videogames on young people. To put the relevance of video games into perspective, in 2010 the release of *Modern Warfare 2* became the largest media release of all time, with sales in excess of \$401 million in the first 24 hours (Guinness\_World\_Records, 2010). In comparison, the most successful film release of all time, *The Twilight Saga: Blue Moon*, had sales during the same period in excess of \$72 million (Variety, 2009), whilst *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* brought in \$197 million (kotaku, 2009) to hold the same record for a book release. Comments from the creators of *Modern Warfare 2* have stated that “The shattering of these entertainment records is a testament to the compelling, cinematic, and uniquely engaging experience that the *Call of Duty [Modern Warfare 2]* brand delivers” (Activision, 2009). Moving beyond the hype-building rhetoric typical of media-releases, the sentiments reveal a great deal about the nature of the game in question, and in fact many popular games. When we consider that games like this attract millions of online players, communicating, interacting and ‘being’ socialised with little regard for national borders, it becomes difficult to describe *Modern Warfare 2* as anything less than ‘engaging’ and ‘compelling’. What the above figures reveal is a new and highly popular textual world inhabited largely by young people who commit their own time, money and enormous amounts of energy to game-playing. What should be concluded from the absence of videogames from school study? It should not be surprising that teachers focus on a narrow canon of literature sanctioned by those with political power and social influence (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 6), afterall, these are the texts which most adult teachers have come to ‘master’ throughout their academic and professional lives. However, the opportunity to critically interrogate texts which students engage with almost daily should not be neglected because of a lack of teacher familiarity with new forms of multimodal literacy.

The rapid technologisation of our post-industrial world, characterised by growing access to mobile phones, personal computers, wi-fi networks and videogame devices, continues to change the ways in which people socialise and share information. Young people have been at the forefront of embracing and mastering these new communication technologies. Snyder’s (2008) *Being Digital* project reported on young people’s engagement with digital technologies in the various dimensions of their lives. 98 per cent of all students surveyed had access to a computer at home with most, 93 per cent, having access to the internet (p. 12). It found that most of the respondents used their computers everyday, with more than half spending at least an hour a day surfing the web, checking email, or chatting online (p. 3). The majority of young people had a CD player, MP3 player or stereo in their bedrooms, with most owning at least ten digital devices. What becomes apparent is that digital

technologies, and especially the internet, have become intrinsic to the everyday lives of most young people who are at the forefront of its use (Fyfe, 2009, p. 40). As each subsequent generation grows up owning and using more and more of these devices attention has turned towards the skills necessary to show competence with these multimodal literacies (Unsworth, 2001, p. 71).

### **Videogames and learning and teaching**

Cope and Kalantzis (2000) have highlighted the distinctive way in which meanings are created in digital media. In the context of local diversity and global connectedness, modes of communication much broader than language need to be considered (p. 7). Reading can no longer be conceptualised as the processing solely of print (Unsworth, 2006, p. 6). The coming together of written, aural and visual modalities has been described as a 'new communication order' (Snyder, 2001). The implications of these new literacies for learning and teaching are significant. Characterised by participatory, collaborative and distributed practices, these new literacies privilege participation over publishing, distributed experience over centralised experts, collaboration over individualised authorship, sharing over ownership, experimentation over normalisation, innovation and evolution over stability and fixity, and creative, innovative rule-breaking over generic purity and policing (Knobel & Lankshear, 2007, p. 21).

The connection between videogames and learning and teaching as been addressed by numerous researchers seeking to legitimise the study of videogames and digital texts in school classrooms (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2003; Steinkuehler, 2006). Gee (2003) argues that theories of learning in good videogames compare to how good learning and teaching works in schools. He outlines 36 Learning Principles found in good videogames which are explored as a means to build schooling on better principles of learning. One of Gee's core concepts is the notion of situated cognition. In other words, thinking and learning are tied to bodies which have experiences in the world, and these experiences occur, or are situated within, a material, social and cultural world (p. 9). The reason games are seen as good examples of learning and teaching is that they immerse players, in the form of a virtual character controlled by a real-life person, in a world of action. The player learns through experimentation and experience which is guided, or scaffolded, by game designers who gradually give the player new information (Gee, 2007, p. 108).

Bowman (in Squire, 2003) highlights specific features of videogames as models for improving learning and teaching. Whereas traditional teaching denies students control, positions teachers as the arbiters of what material is to be passively received by learners, and involves conforming to the pace and ability of the group, videogames create alternate

learning environments. They allow for collaboration, place decision-making in the hands of players, create contexts where learners are active, involve learning through participation in communities of practice and give clear feedback on performance. Games have the capacity to elicit powerful emotional reactions (Squire, 2003) and to place game-players in a state of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), whereby a person's level of engagement is such that time becomes distorted, self-consciousness disappears, and the motivation for continued activity is led not by external rewards, but intrinsic motivation.

Recent reports into the engagement and motivation level of Australian schools suggest literacy educators could learn a great deal from these digital devices. Numerous reports have highlighted disengagement, lack of motivation, and a disconnection between the everyday literacy practices of young people and their school-based literacy work as issues of concern (Alloway, Freebody, Gilbert, & Muspratt, 2002; Australia. Dept. of Employment Education Training and Youth Affairs., 1998; Australia. Parliament. House of Representatives. Standing Committee on Education and Training. & Bartlett, 2002; Trent & Slade, 2001). Schools have the capacity to provide opportunities for embodied experiences and stimulating, simulated, environments. Science students are provided with circumstances to feel like scientists as they mix chemicals in their white labcoats, biology students can be marine biologists as they dissect fish, and geography students act like geographers as they taste the salty air whilst collecting beach samples and recording tidal trends. Like videogames these scenarios involve immersing learners in worlds of action where they learn through experience (Gee, 2007, p. 108). The capacity of videogames to provide, through simulations, visual and embodied experiences relating to specific domains, be they fighting the Japanese on the shores of Iwo Jima, or designing and organising a civilisation to confront the Ancient Romans, allow a gamer to feel what it is like to act effectively *in* a domain. Literacy classrooms could learn a great deal from these embodied experiences.

### **Videogames, Identity and Gender**

Gee states that all learning in semiotic domains involves taking on a new identity and forming bridges from one's old identities to the new one (2007, p. 45). In order to give a text meaning, whether that text is a videogame or a Shakespearean play, one has to produce another text, where this other text is the spoken or mental representation of the original work (Gee, 1992, p. 13). In producing this other text, language, thought, and action, inextricably tied to social, ideological, and political dispositions, are enacted. In other words, the meaning a person gains from a text is a reflection not simply of the content of the text, but of all of the social interaction and networks of associations that the person has experienced and

established throughout their lifetime, which together form their identity. A key focus of my research will be to understand how identity is being constructed and (re)produced during gameplay.

The power of videogames is that they encourage identity work and reflection on identities (Gee, 2003, p. 46). Gee's identity Principle states that:

Learning involves taking on and playing with identities in such a way that the learners has real choices (in developing the virtual identity) and ample opportunity to mediate on the relationship between new identities and old ones. There is a tripartite play of identities as learners relate, and reflect on, their multiple real-world identities, a virtual identity, and a projective identity (Gee, 2003, p. 64)

Videogames provide opportunities for people to project their own values and desires onto virtual characters, a risk-taking act less possible in real-world circumstances where consequences are heightened. Thus a projective identity is established which acts as an interface between one's real world identities and the virtual identity which exists within a game. The way that a person builds their virtual identities through projecting their hopes, desires and dispositions, reveals a great deal about the player. Their projective identity represents a space where they can transcend the limitations of their own real world identity.

Beavis and Charles (2005) have used the video game *Sims* to explore the way gender identities are formed and challenged. Their research demonstrated how games like *Sims* open up occasions for girls to resist predetermined notions of what it means to be a 'woman'. Interestingly, boys in the same study were more likely to create a fantasy world characterised by "chaotic, exaggerated, and irresponsible lifestyles" (p. 363) rather than challenging notions of masculinity. Gee celebrates the potential of games as "worlds in a box" (in Foreman, 2004, p. 53). Texts that allow the user to create a world and take on an identity are places where people can learn deeply. There is a risk, however, of using popular culture texts in classrooms solely for the purpose of engagement. Teachers must play an active role in disturbing the norms portrayed in video games and target the social constructions of gender they depict so that learning behaviours and orientations can be contested. A poststructuralist lens, typified by the work of Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, is particularly useful in grounding this type of gender work.

The dispositions revealed throughout game playing reveal a great deal about both the creators of games and the way that learners use language to produce individual and collective acts. Bourdieu (1991, p. 58) argues that the limited language practices available within particular fields, such as being a girl, or participating in a literacy class, are a product

of the process of continuous creation, which occur through struggles between those competing within the field. Problematising seemingly normal conditions in games, such as the dominance of male protagonists, the ways that females are commonly portrayed as sexual objects, or the extent to which their own values and choices shape the story, all help uncover their own ideologies as well of those inherent in all texts. Can playing games where people are presented with new and resistant ways to 'be' male and female characters in games challenge limiting stereotypes? Will reflection on the decisions made during gameplay experiences challenge dispositions?

Socially constructed gender roles act as power systems which all girls and boys must conform to. These roles constrain the ability of many young people to participate in schools-based practices aimed at improving their educational capacities. For example, much research has revealed that many boys struggle to engage with school-based literacy practices which they perceive as feminised acts, and therefore as a challenge to their masculinity (Freebody & Baker, 1987; W. Martino, 2000; W Martino, 2001; Wayne Martino & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2005). Pierre Bourdieu's *Masculine Domination* (2001) highlights the ways in which discourses of gender become naturalised in social and cultural spaces. Dispositions of thought and action are seen as a product of a lifetime of exposure to social structures which are lived and actively reproduced by individuals and groups. These social groups operate to favour certain kinds of activity and inhibit others. In this way they act as a form of 'symbolic violence' (p. 5), imperceptible and invisible to their victims. Even from very early childhood, boys and girls are exposed to different 'collective expectations' that shape their dispositions, and are sustained over time and place. Videogames, like all texts, are sites where power and privilege are reproduced and maintained.

Foucault's work on 'regimes of truth' help us understand how ways of being a female and male, or girls and boys, have been conceptualised in very limited ways. The so-called 'truths' surrounding all of the social practices associated with girls and boys are highly political.

Foucault names such truths 'regimes of truth', saying:

Each society has its regimes of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (Foucault, 1980, p. 131)

The regime of truth relating to the discourse of gender is maintained through disciplinary power, whereby regulation of the self is achieved through the internalization of regulation by

others. In terms of gender and education, student subject choice helps us understand this idea. Patterns of participation in the Victorian senior curriculum are reflections of their social dispositions. Trends show that boys are numerically more strongly represented in the Mathematics and Physical Sciences, in comparison to Literature and the Humanities (Teese, Davies, Charlton, & Polesel, 1995). Since the post-war decades, the gender spread of Literature has come to be dominated by the increasing numbers of girls reaching the final year of schooling (Teese & Polesel, 2003: 84). In 1998 girls from the best educated families were five times more likely to take literature as boys from unskilled manual workers' families (: 86). A Foucauldian perspective dictates that systems of power will be maintained so long as they remain "permanent, repetitious, inert and self-producing" (Falzon, 1998, p. 49). If teachers do not guide students into understanding the systems of power involved in normalising gender roles, then the status quo becomes the accepted norm.

### **Video games and critical pedagogies**

One way in which dominant practices and perceptions of gender can be fractured is through raising the critical consciousness of students. Paulo Freire's ideas on emancipatory literacy and education for empowerment essentially seek to disturb the status quo (2000). In the same way that Freire aimed to help his peasant students to understand the world in the word, and by following the praxis "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 51) this study asks whether it is possible, and perhaps necessary, to help students understand how videogames and language, the most important form of power, are used to represent the world. Significantly, power and empowerment hold crucial roles. The project of education for empowerment involves the cultivation of a sociological imagination, where people's position in the world is recognised as historically, culturally and politically constituted, so that they may then challenge and transform this world (Simpson & Comber, 2001, p. 31). To not focus on the political nature of reading and writing is to accept as default someone else's political agenda (Luke, 1994, p. 4). However, power within this discourse, is not merely something that can be given. Rather, I defer to Foucault's notion of power as something that is exercised, rather than possessed (Paras, 2006, p. 79).

Freire's ideas on conscientization and empowerment are similar to those that have gained increasing recognition throughout literacy pedagogy in Australia, namely critical literacy. Proponents of critical literacy focus on the building of student capacity to analyse and criticise the texts and ideologies of contemporary work and culture (Luke, 1994, p. 44). It recognises that schools are implicated in the distribution and division of knowledge. They shape and select what texts are studied and which classroom practices preferred, which work together to portray the world and position readers in a particular way. Critical literacy is

strongly connected to poststructuralist understandings of language as socially constructed, and where meanings, in texts change in different times and places, and as they are read by readers in different circumstances (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 6)

The potential for critical literacy is for opening up classrooms to new and resistant textual practices. Rather than encouraging compliance or reproducing what the teacher deems appropriate knowledge (Luke, 1994, p. 46), critical literacy practices encourage readers to take up resistant reading positions (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. 150). Furthermore, it is within this discourse surrounding the significance of socio-cultural contexts in building meanings, that the corpus of traditional 'great' literary works can come to be differently valued (p. 9), and popular culture texts introduced as legitimate texts for textual study. The video game *Fable* (Lionhead-Studios, 2004), set in the fictional world of Albion, requires players to assume the role of an orphaned boy as he realises his dream to become a hero. The decisions made by players affect the way other characters in Albion perceive and react to their hero whose appearance changes according to the good or evil deeds pursued by the player throughout the story. With a constantly changing and evolving protagonist, an array of antagonists, various themes and settings, as well as a plot that changes depending on the players' decision-making, *Fable* has all of the elements typically found in texts chosen for study in English classrooms. In particular, much of the meaning making in the game is achieved visually, raising questions about how this mode of communication opens up conceptions of reading. When game players activate a mental practice like reading, they are in fact 'doing' social practice which has itself been socioculturally defined. As a result, their 'reading' will be shaped by their particular dispositions.

### **Videogames and narratives**

What interests me about videogames is not just their capacity to encourage action and reflection on practices of gender, but in their capacity to build stories. Unlike traditional novels, poems, plays and short stories, where the plot has already been created prior to reading, many videogames are written and read simulatenously. Whilst boundaries and rules have been put in place, what a player chooses to do with their given context is up to then. The act of creating a story is thus a relationship, collaborative in nature, between game designers and game players. The picture is further complicated during multiplayer gameplay when players work co-operatively to create collective as well as individual stories. The success of this story is often dependent on their ability to work as a team, and on the willingness or capacity of other groups of players, or even a computer-based AI, artificial intelligence, to allow them to follow their chosen course of action and work as a team. What



occurs is a situation where reflection and analysis of past actions and their consequences on the game become a prerequisite for progress and the realisation of a complete story.

The poststructuralist idea that there can be no single 'true' meaning of a text (Misson & Morgan, 2006, p. xv) places increased emphasis on the contextual variables in which any reading takes place. It is the complex negotiation between the reader and text, that constructs meaning. Bakhtin has used the term chronotype to describe the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (1981, p. 184). In other words, meanings are dependent on time and space. As such, Bakhtin provides three chronotypes of 'epic' novels as examples: the adventure novel of ordeal (a Greek Romance), the adventure novel of everyday life, and the ancient biography and autobiography. Each chronotype has distinctive spatial and temporal indicators, which fuse to define genres. The polyphony chorotype is often celebrated as marking a significant shift away from the 'epic' narratives. The polyphony, or multivoicedness, chronotype referred to a new genre of literature characterized by a "plurality of consciousness" (Bakhtin in Nikolajeva, 1996, p. 97), whereby characters are ideological in the sense that they are "the mouthpiece of the author's views (p. 101). As the author steps back, the mind of the character acts as a filter to describe events as they occur. Videogame narratives represent a new chronotype altogether.

Videogames that secede control over the narrative process to the gameplayer invite collaboration and multiple-authoring. If we return to the poststructuralist idea that texts only gain meaning once they are read, what then are the implications when the texts themselves are being created and read simultaneously? Temporal variables are fractured as players start, stop, and restart stories based on ongoing experiences and continuous meaning making. Spatial variables are similarly difficult to identify considering the interplay between game-designers, game players, and game-masters, contributing to stories unfolding in online environments, personified by virtual worlds. Contemporary videogames create the circumstances for a new form of chronotype typified by what appears to be schizophrenic narratives in constant flux and change. More work needs to be done to understand how decision-making in games affects the stories created.

What will my research look like

One of the greatest challenges of being a doctoral student with little experience in educational research relates to methodological issues. I know what I want to do and I think I know why. The 'how' is laced with uncertainty. Do I conduct a longitudinal study with one classroom of students, visited fortnightly for an entire school year? Or do I visit many student groups for one-day visits involving a standardised program of activities? Do I take on the role of teacher-researcher, running activities and actively scaffolding critical pedagogy? Or do I distance myself from such work, and relegate authority to the classroom teacher and their ideas for critical videogame study? Do I focus on the explicit teaching of a specific game? Or encourage and value student voice and allow their own discussions to guide the direction of the research and the manner in which the project will develop? Underlying all of the above is a belief that I can make a difference. Whether that difference is positive or not, and who will be most affected is yet to be determined.

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