

DIGITAL GAMES



**CATHERINE BEAVIS, JOANNE O'MARA
AND LISA MCNEICE (EDS)**



DIGITAL GAMES

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LITERACY IN ACTION

**CATHERINE BEAVIS, JOANNE O'MARA
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Preface

Play up! play up! and play the game!

Digital games and the literacy boomerang

Cal Durrant

In January of 1995, the Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE) national conference was held at North Sydney Boys High School. The weather was warm and sunny, and the mid-north coast beaches beckoned me away from Armidale, but I was keen to hear Myron Tuman, author of *Word perfect: Literacy in the computer age* (1992), as I'd been involved in getting him to the conference, so down to Sydney I dutifully went. During a lull between keynotes, I noticed in the program a presentation by Catherine Beavis and Terry Hayes on something called the *Prince of Persia*. Although I had recently become interested in the ways computer technology was impacting on English classrooms (e.g., Durrant, 1995), I had not thought much to that point about computer games as sources of textual study, so I found the school based research that Catherine was conducting with Terry Hayes' Year 8s at Hawthorn Secondary College quite fascinating.

Those tentative beginnings in the early 1990s have now expanded into the richly theorised model that we see in evidence throughout this book. For someone interested in the uneasy and complex relationships between computers and English teachers over the past three decades (see Durrant, 2001; Durrant & Hargreaves, 1995, 1996), I think it's important to reflect on just where computer games might fit within the literacy spaces that have opened up during that period.

Recently, I came across Miles Myers' discussion paper entitled: *The present literacy crisis and the public interest* (Myers, 1986). During the 1980s, Myers was President of the Californian Federation of Teachers, Chair of the Trustees of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) and Co-Director in charge of Evaluation of the Bay Area Writing Project (Myers, 1987, p. 4). His paper addressed yet another 'literacy crisis' in the United States and took the unusual position that literacy crises evolve from a record of school successes

rather than failures because the achievement of each new standard of literacy contributes to the pressure for yet higher standards and an almost inevitable newly perceived crisis in the next cycle (p. 17).

I have described elsewhere (Durrant, 2012) the various literacy stages that Myers suggested have existed in the United States since the beginning of the 19th century, so I will merely sketch them here. He noted that in 1800 the US required its citizens to be fluent speakers (Oral literacy) but that by the middle of the 19th century, they needed to be able to sign their names (Signature literacy) as part of the demands of a new agrarian economy with a population largely transient between eastern and western seaboard, a scenario not so unlike the situation in the Australian colonies at that time, though perhaps for different reasons (Myers, 1986, p. 3).

In addition, there had been a major intake of migrants into the United States by this time and schools were being pressured to add a new form of literacy to previous requirements, that of Recitation literacy as a means of socialising the children of these newcomers into the ways and values of their adopted country. This form of literacy required children to 'recite passages from core texts of the culture' as a means of demonstrating their acknowledgement of what being a US citizen meant (p. 4).

The American involvement in World War I saw new literacy demands move towards basic Sign literacy as part of a shift to what Myers called Comprehension literacy. Without the capacity to make sense of the relationships between letters and sounds, or to read signs and labels, it was difficult for the population to be active members of organised armies, factories or markets. Interestingly enough, critics argued that this new emphasis on print literacy was something that was going to lead over time to 'a general loss of memory and a general decline in intelligence' of the American population (p. 5). Unsurprisingly, this is not an argument restricted to this period of American education; other educational alarmists have marshalled similar arguments against newer thinking about and approaches to literacy (see for example, Donnelly, 2004, 2005 on Critical literacy).

Myers asserts that while Sign literacy was sufficient during and immediately after World War II, by the time of the Vietnam conflict, it was no longer perceived as being enough. A full shift to Comprehension literacy was now required, and the pressure for this came with the launch of Russia's Sputnik in 1957. Myers suggested that this event demonstrated to all Americans that simple skills in phonics and signs would not cut it in the new space age; more

advanced literacy skills around the summarising of literal information was now needed. Not only this, but in order to achieve such gains, new models of teaching were required, and so behaviourist forms of learning were introduced to American schools whereby skills and drills became the norm and teachers were encouraged to implement stimulus-response materials prepared and supplied by centralised agencies (p. 7).

But between the 1950s and the 1980s, critics began to suggest that undue emphasis on Comprehension literacy was exposing American students to manipulation by authors of printed texts, and so the idea of developing Inferential literacy was proposed. It is interesting to note that this was not an exclusively educational directive. Rather it was done in recognition that market driven economies required literate workers capable of making informed decisions not just in their personal lives but also in the context of the workplace. Such development would produce a workforce with the capacity to move flexibly between jobs as well as meet changing job demands. It is not unlike the multiple imperatives for Australian students outlined by documents such as the 1989 Hobart Declaration (Ministerial Council for Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), 1999), where one of the aims for the Common and Agreed National Goals for Schooling in Australia was:

To respond to the current and emerging economic and social needs of the nation, and to provide those skills which will allow students maximum flexibility and adaptability in their future employment and other aspects of life.

Myers' literacy progression is summarised below in Figure 1.

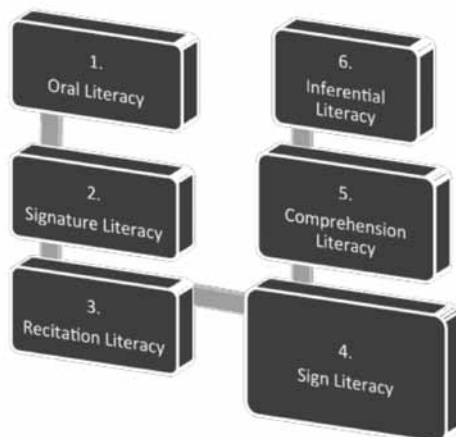


Figure 1. The Miles Myers Literacy Stages (After Myers, 1986)

Over a decade ago, Bill Green and I used a similar set of progressions in our discussion around literacy in 3D and the new technologies in education (Durrant and Green, 2000), based on Chip Bruce's description in Figure 2.

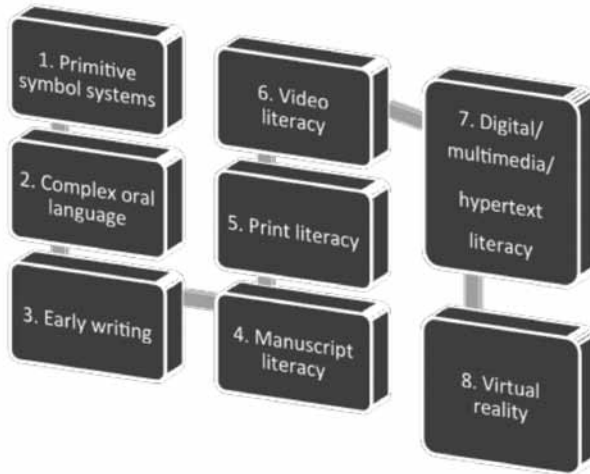


Figure 2. The Chip Bruce Literacy Stages (After Bruce, 1998)

In Figure 3, I have conflated these two overviews of literacy developments onto what I have called elsewhere the 'Literacy Boomerang' (Durrant, 2012). Framing the Boomerang are Myers' Literacy development stages that run along the bottom of the diagram from Oral literacy on the left to Comprehension literacy on the right. This is then picked up again across the top of the frame commencing with Comprehension literacy in the top right corner through to the additions I have included encompassing Web 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 literacies in the top left corner.

Readers are possibly familiar with the terms Web 1.0, 2.0 and 3.0 and the types of literacies associated with them. Web 1.0 principally comprises content material on the internet; it is very much a one-way communication process where the user searches for 'information', which was mostly print based in nature when it began during the early 1990s. Web 2.0 is variously referred to as Social networking or the social Web; *Facebook* and *YouTube* are perhaps the most recognisable services provided, and the literacy demands move away from mere information retrieval to interactional sharing via text, video and screen. Web 3.0 is less easily definable, but appears to be characterised by advances on Web 2.0 services in the sense that everything is designed to be smaller, faster, more flexible across platforms and devices, more mobile

Part 1

Framing chapters

Chapter 1

Literacy learning and computer games: A curriculum challenge for our times

*Catherine Beavis, Joanne O'Mara and
Lisa McNeice*

This book comes from the work of many teachers, researchers and observant others who contributed to the three year project, *Literacy in the Digital World of the Twenty-first Century: Learning from Computer Games*. Like much work in education, when the project was first conceived, we did not imagine the shape of the final journey, the people we would encounter along the way and the relationships we would form with different teachers, schools, researchers and theorists as a result of this project. The book represents the work of the teachers, students, academics and educators who participated in the project, underpinned by the vision and contribution of the Industry Partners: The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English. It conveys a sense of our exploration, and maps the territory we covered and what individually and collectively participants in the project have realised. The project team comprised Catherine Beavis, Clare Bradford, Joanne O'Mara and Christopher S. Walsh, together with Research Fellow Thomas Apperley, and a team of teacher researchers including co-editor Lisa McNeice. Research assistance was provided by Amanda Gutierrez and Phillipa Hodder at Deakin University, and by Joy Reynolds and Jay Deagon at Griffith University. In conjunction with the Industry Partners, the project was funded by the Australian Research Council under its Linkage scheme.

Why computer games? Why in school?

There are two themes to which we have returned again and again in different guises throughout the life of the project. The first concerns the connection that many young people have with computer games or videogames, in their out-of-school worlds. Are there ways we might build bridges between in- and out-of-school worlds through recognising and incorporating many students' deep involvement with digital culture and their knowledge and expertise in negotiating the online world? Might we be able to draw on that knowledge, and the kinds of engagement, cooperation, problem solving and critique fostered by many popular computer games, to make school more 'relevant,' both in relation to how students see school and with respect to 'new' forms of knowledge and curriculum?

These questions raised a number of others. What might we learn about our students and contemporary literacy practices by observing their involvement with games in their leisure worlds? What might happen if we brought games into the classroom in different ways? How might we do so? Once these questions were raised, more followed. Are there skills that young people use in their gaming that might apply to schooling? Is this 'on the edge' activity really part of the mainstream? What might it mean for a teacher to use games in his or her classroom? How might students make and create their own games at school? Could learning at school be enlivened by the introduction of out-of-school knowledge and activities? Could games be more than just a motivational tool to spark interest in traditional curriculum activities?

The second theme focuses on the changing nature of literacy and what it might mean to be a 'literate person' now and in the future. Our work is based on our understanding that literacy is changing as a result of new technologies and that this has important implications for the English classroom. So we considered the ways in which and the extent to which games functioned as new forms of text and literacy. We wondered what young people were doing as they played games, what, if any, literacy skills they were developing and how 'games literacy' might be described. We observed that students were very agential in their relationships with games, both in the ways in which they played and when they were designing their own games or designing within the gameworld. There seemed to be a knowing and critical edge to the ways in which the students with whom we worked positioned themselves in relationship to their games and gaming that is often overlooked in popular discourse. Teachers in the project observed that students seemed

highly engaged with the units of work they had designed around games, and that working with games opened up new spaces for conversation and relationships. In addition, for many students, new insights, skills and understandings in relation to print and/or digital literacies seemed to grow out of their use and/or analysis of games. This seemed to be worth pursuing.

In our initial planning for the project we drew on four sets or frameworks of ideas to think about games, young people and literacy. Traces of these frameworks can be seen in different ways in most of the chapters in the book. The first framework came from work in media and cultural studies that brought together institutions, texts and audiences, as seen, for example, in the work of David Buckingham (2000) and Julian Sefton-Green (1998). It came to include also more recent work from these writers (e.g., Buckingham, 2007; Sefton-Green, 2006) and other researchers in the fields of digital culture, new media, new literacies and participatory culture. These include such figures as Donna Alvermann (2010), Andrew Burn (2009), James Gee (2003), Henry Jenkins (2006) and Jackie Marsh (2005). This work provided a generative framework for understanding games as media texts, the social and creative energies entailed in gameplay, and the new and traditional literacy practices surrounding them.

A second framework came from sociological studies of the place of digital culture in young people's lives. This framework provided a way of understanding something of the functions and consequences of digital literacies in the lives of adolescents and their embeddedness in games culture and global marketing, together with their implications for school contexts and literacy education. Representative researchers here include Bourdieu & Wacquant (1992); Carrington & Luke (1997), researchers in the new social studies of childhood (e.g., Hutchby & Moran-Ellis, 2001) and social geographers such as Livingstone & Haddon (2009). As the project progressed, this framework came also to include work specific to the games studies, in particular Bogost's notion of 'procedural rhetoric' (2007), Galloway's (2006) emphasis on the role of the machine and Consalvo's notion of 'gaming capital' (2007).

We wanted to explore the ways in which games told stories, and to learn more about the ways in which new and traditional forms of narrative, positioning, representation and response were combined. We were also interested in games as new forms of communication, and the view of literacy as design. A third framework therefore drew together work from the fields of children's literature, digital culture, drama and semiotics, drawing on literary and play

theory and grammars of visual design. Resources here included research by project member Clare Bradford (2006), and Kress & van Leeuwin's 'grammar of visual design' (1996).

The fourth framework, which helped us bring together the different strands of the project and to support the research, planning and teaching undertaken by teachers in the project was Green's 3D L(IT)eracy model (1999). This model, originally developed in relation to writing in the subject areas and further adapted to provide a way of 'thinking together' literacy and Information Technology (IT), argues the need to attend to 'cultural, critical and operational' dimensions in thinking about texts and literacy, and to incorporate all three dimensions in integrated ways in curriculum planning in English and other subject areas and in teaching with, through and about literacy (Durrant & Green, 2000, pp. 97–98). The three dimensions of this model – cultural, critical and operational – are all represented in these chapters in various ways. The model has been and continues to be influential in our thinking about how games might be used in classroom and what this might mean for teachers and schools.

Over the course of the project, a model for thinking about games and literacy was developed, arising from the work of the teachers, students and researchers, the initial theorisation through Green's 3D model and Games Studies perspectives introduced into the project by Tom Apperley. This model is presented in Chapter Two. It appears again later in the book where Tom and Catherine visit each of the school-based chapters, noting the areas that the chapters addressed, and discussing each chapter in terms of how the activities and approaches they describe sit with respect to the model. We hope that these chapters, and the model, will be useful resources for teachers and researchers engaging with work of this kind. In addition, we are indebted to Tom Apperley for the compilation of additional resources presented in Part 5.

Exploring, arriving and re-viewing

This work provides a variety of perspectives on games, literacy and learning. The research projects represented in this book were conducted in schools, and were reliant upon the partnerships and generosity of teachers. We are very pleased that so much of their work is represented here. One of the things we did not anticipate was the breadth of teacher research that would be undertaken and the different circumstances and approaches. These chapters explore a range of different approaches to games in English including creating games

in the classroom, creating new texts from the games, analysing games and gameworlds as texts and exploring what it means to play games.

The three of us as co-editors have brought different experiences to the research project and this book. Catherine has been researching literacy and computer games since 1995. For her, the project was an opportunity to build on earlier work with teachers and students exploring English, literacy and computer games, and to work with a range of colleagues from different areas to investigate further the kinds of phenomena games are, the ways young people engage with them, and the implications for English and literacy. She writes:

For years I've been fascinated with the idea of computer games as 'texts'; with the ways playing games requires players to call on a wide range of knowledge and resources, including the capacity to simultaneously interpret and respond to an interacting set of multimodal forms of representation on the screen – sound, movement, colour, imagery, symbol, characters and so on – and with how games seemed to be pushing the boundaries of literacy and embodying new forms of narrative. I liked the idea of games as 'emergent cultural forms' – whatever that might mean – and I was impressed by the richness and complexity of many games. I could not help being struck by the high levels of skill, energy and commitment young players brought to the world of games, their participation in the games community and the care taken in many instances in managing the terms of that participation and their representation there.

Thinking about all this in relation to English teaching and curriculum, it seemed to me that there were many questions and possibilities here: for students and teachers to learn more about the literacies and narrative forms of games; for connecting school curriculum and teaching with the world beyond school and for learning more about new literacies and multimodal literacies. It seemed there were opportunities here for critical examination and reflection and the development of critical literacy perspectives on games; and for learning more about learning – in particular, the collaborative problem-solving orientations often fostered by games, and the use of 'distributed knowledge.' It also seemed important to consider how attention to such matters articulated with the traditional concerns of English teaching and curriculum, and how they challenged or contributed to subject renewal for English in the digital world. The project offered the chance to explore questions such as these with a like-minded community 'on the ground.' It has been exciting and informative to learn from teachers

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and students in the project about how they see and negotiate matters such as these, and to work with colleagues from so many diverse areas to arrive at a rich (and not always comfortable or consistent) set of perspectives on what we might learn from games and students' engagement with them for 21st century English Curriculum and literacy.

Jo, having worked with Catherine from 2001 teaching English method at Deakin University, gradually became more and more interested in games through connecting with Catherine's research. She writes:

Having trained initially as an English and Media Studies teacher, I see these two disciplines as merging due to the changing nature of texts and literacy. Engaging with the 'outsiders' to school education with whom we worked in this project was intellectually invigorating and gave us new ways of seeing the work. Brett McLennan and Vince Trundle from the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) provided screen-based insights and analysis. Vince Trundle worked with Pip Hodder and myself, as we interviewed students from the different participating schools about how they were reading the screens when they were playing the games. The insightful questions Vince asked the students expanded my understanding of the enactment of screen semiotics – how these students were processing all the information with which they were working and then translating them into actions in the games. Tom Apperley brought an incredible depth of knowledge and respect for games and the cultural and critical theories that are being developed around gaming. This was significant for connecting the educational aspect of the work into the broader games field. Clare Bradford's narrative analysis was spectacular and challenging, and the importance of the changing nature of contemporary narratives to English Curriculum cannot be underestimated.

The teachers with whom we worked are represented in the book, with most of them contributing chapters. Members of the Deakin team worked in different schools, and got to know the work of participating teachers accordingly. Significant for me was the work John Richards did on game-making with his students. His approach to the classroom, the ways in which he structured the relationships with his students and the preparation these students are doing for their futures was stunning and has made me re-think the way relationships can be forged and supported in classrooms. I also worked with the drama teacher at his school, Belinda Lees, to further investigate the ways the students positioned

themselves within the world of games, which was fun and revealing. I really enjoyed working with Jeannette Hannaford as she completed her Masters of Education degree. Her findings from an after-school computer club were unexpected and challenging. In addition to the work of classroom teachers, I found the ways in which the teacher-librarian developed his library-based program to extend and connect with his students outside of their regular classrooms exciting and practical.

As I continue to work with teachers in training and teachers in school, and watch my own children growing up with computer games, it is more and more obvious how important they are to our culture and the possibilities they hold for education.

Lisa, English coordinator at one of the project schools, was inspired to use computer games in the English classroom after seeing presentations from many members of the project team during the Australian Government Summer School for Teachers in 2008. She writes:

The Summer School included a trip to ACMI which brought on a realisation so startling in its simplicity I was ashamed that I'd never thought of it before. I already knew that our most fundamental task as teachers is to meet the students where they are ... where they are already actively literate, where they are already successfully communicating, where their identity is acknowledged and respected, and where they are already showing leadership, team work, curiosity and taking active creative control within a context. What I hadn't done was connect this to computer games in my teaching. Why not?

I suddenly had a vision of my Year 9 English class. Scenario: kids are happily playing computer games; I come in. 'Stop playing games!' I say. (Subtext: Stop communicating, stop seeking and absorbing information from multiple sources and synthesising that information so you can make decisions and act on those decisions. Stop having fun!) 'We're going to do English now!' Groans, reluctant but largely good-willed acquiescence, a withdrawing, a settling down, a glazing over.

What if I could change that scenario? What if my colleagues and I could create a unit of work that revelled in the students' exploration of computer games? That allowed us to say, 'Keep playing games! And tell us all about it!'

I was not a computer-game player, but I had a keen interest in games as text, and I worked from that starting point. As I worked with the project leaders and

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other participants, however, I came to see games as being as much (or more) to do with action as with text. The model for games and literacy developed through the project is helping me with my own journey towards the successful teaching of digital literacy in the 21st century. My design approach started from the relative safety of the idea of the text within the action. In future, though, I'll be moving much more towards exploring the digital literacy imperatives and possibilities provided by the action within the text.

Professor Claire Wyatt-Smith, Dean (Academic) for Arts, Education and Law at Griffith University said at a recent gathering of teachers, 'The agency of children in directing learning is forced on us in the realm of technology.' This is true, but in good teaching this has always been the case – or should have been. We must continue to acknowledge the agency of our students (that is, their authentic selves, their interests, their active realms where they feel acknowledged and articulate) in directing learning into the future.

Teachers know that students learn when they're having fun and being challenged. I learned a huge amount from this project.

In addition to the teachers and other writers included in this book, a number of key figures have been essential to the project's success in many ways. Louise Dressing, and through her the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development in Victoria, provided unfailing interest, presence and support in many ways. Her deep understanding of the realities of school and of teachers' and students' needs, and her ongoing commitment and openness to exploring new possibilities for curriculum and pedagogy to meet these needs, made her a central player. Gael McIndoe of the Australian Centre for the Moving Image (ACMI) saw the possibilities of the project from the earliest times, approved ACMI's participation, introduced us to Brett McLennan and Vincent Trundle, project stalwarts, and donated extensive time and usage of the ACMI facilities, including the ACMI games lab, and the 2008 *Game On!* exhibition of computer games. Days at the ACMI games lab under the guidance of Brett and Vincent provided much-needed 'games literacy' education for many of the teachers and researchers on the team, in addition to providing an invaluable location for the observation and analysis of students' gameplay. Greg Houghton, then President of VATE, together with the council at that time, saw the proposed project as consistent with VATE's long-standing commitment to a rich and inclusive understanding of literacy, in which young people's literacy is situated in its social and cultural context.