CHAPTER 9

“There’s More Going On”: Critical Digital Game Literacies and the Imperative of Praxis

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Abstract

Digital games represent ubiquitous forms of everyday social and cultural activity. Young people are engaging with these texts across a range of physical and digital spaces, and the speed with which digital game literacies have evolved has raised questions about how teachers can support their students to be critical participants in a digital game literacy world. This chapter explores a case study that involved the development and delivery of an Indigenous story-telling Unit combining the play and study of a digital game with a short animation film. The first part of this chapter details the nature of the intervention, including brief descriptions of activities from the case study, highlighting the challenge of progressing beyond literary approaches to texts that focus on decoding and engaging with authors’ intended meanings. The second part engages more closely with Critical Digital Literacies praxis (Avila & Zacher Pandya, 2012), re-examining the intervention with the assistance of Luci Pangrazio’s (2016, 2019) ‘Critical Digital Design’ approach. The aim is to demonstrate how both students and teachers can encourage border-crossing in terms of what texts we bring to the literacy classroom, and the critical dispositions we seek to nurture.

Keywords

critical literacy; digital games; praxis; pedagogy
Introduction
The notion that literacy is more than a skill bestowed by educators like a gift has created opportunities for rethinking learning and teaching. Rather than conceiving of literacy in terms of what students can do with pen and paper, and consequently, what can be measured through standardised testing regimes, there is now a broad consensus that literacy involves activity of a social and cultural kind (Street, 2000). Given the ubiquitous nature of everyday social and cultural activity now taking place in digital spaces, and the speed with which these practices evolve, questions are being asked about how teachers can support young people to be critical participants in a digital literacy world.

I first became interested in digital game literacies, and the potential work we might do with them in formal learning environments, when I began my teaching career in a high-school in Melbourne, Australia. Still new to teaching, I quickly became aware of a strong deficit discourse amongst the English and literacy faculty regarding the reading habits of boys. Not only were students perceived to be uninterested in traditional literacy activities, but their out of school literacies, non-academic practices less likely to be ‘banked’ for distinction in the classroom (Carrington, 2001), were seen as contributing to their under-performance.

Inside of the classroom, these boys were subjects of a curriculum almost entirely dedicated to the study of novels and film, and where writing was limited to the practice and mastery of analytical text-response essays. Outside of the classroom, they were consumers and producers of an extraordinarily rich collection of digital literacy practices. Digital games represented one technology that was producing complex literate practices and led me to start asking questions about what Bourdieu calls the common-sense construction of the world (Bourdieu, 1977) which colleagues espoused when discussing our students.

As somebody who had engaged extensively with advocates of critical literacy during my pre-service teacher training, I had Freirean (1972) notions of critical literacies praxis firmly in mind when posing questions about how formal learning might contribute to a digital games curriculum, and vice-versa. What do students know about how digital games are created? How do the structures and rules of the game inform possible practice? What representations and ideologies are
presented unproblematically? How does playing digital games with others contribute to an understanding of the world? These, and many other questions, have been front of mind since those very early days when I observed my students engaging with digital gaming.

At the nexus of these two phenomena, digital technologies and critical literacies, are issues of authority, power and equity, especially in terms of how increasingly digital ways of knowing and being impact how we read the world. Ávila and Zacher Pandya’s (2012) definition of Critical Digital Literacies (CDL) as “those skills and practices that lead to the creation of digital texts that interrogate the world” (p. 3) captured practices associated with consuming and producing digital texts, but also the potential of this work to produce new understandings to critique the cultural world we inhabit. While the emphasis on skills remains vital for educators seeking to provide students with opportunities that afford critique and design, a renewed focus on knowledge is also needed. Understanding new evolving semiotic systems, in combination with emergent literate practices, requires engaging with new knowledge about the digital world. This aspect of CDL pedagogy, underemphasised in other digital and critical literacy research, is in need of greater attention.

This chapter explores a case study which sought to shift the boundaries of learning to account for 21st century literacies. The case involves the development and delivery of an Indigenous story-telling Unit which combined the play and study of a digital game with a short animation film. The first part of this chapter details the nature of the intervention, including brief descriptions of activities from the case study, and the findings which emerged from interviews with students and teachers, highlighting the challenge of progressing beyond literary approaches to texts that focus on decoding and engaging with authors’ intended meanings. The second part engages more closely with CDL praxis (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, 2012), re-examining the intervention with the assistance of Luci Pangrazio’s (2016, 2019) ‘Critical Digital Design’ approach.

The aim is to demonstrate how both students and teachers can encourage border-crossing in terms of what texts we bring to the literacy classroom and the critical dispositions we strike to nurture. As such, what follows provides practitioners and teacher educators with an example of how a genuine attempt at designing and implementing a CDL curriculum fell short, but also outlining how a framework of CDL design can move us forward.
Digital Game Literacies and Schooling

A growing body of research has sought to understand what happens when digital games become objects of play and study. James Gee’s exploration of videogame literacies in *What Video Games have to Teach us About Learning and Literacy* (2004) has been formative in this space, demonstrating that the practices associated with gameplay are more complex than public discourse suggests. Focussing on the learning afforded by these new technological forms, Gee demonstrated the complex social and cultural literacy practices associated with digital games. Not only did this work open up digital games as legitimate learning tools for formal educational contexts but it also highlighted the multifaceted relationship between gameplayers and games.

While empirical studies about the effectiveness of digital game based learning have found positive effects, especially in terms of knowledge acquisition, skill attainment, motivation and engagement (Boyle et al., 2016; Connolly et al., 2012; Perrotta et al., 2013), speculative theorising around digital game literacies suggest that the nuances of bringing new technologies into school contexts are more complex. Those attempting to define digital game literacies highlight these complexities. For Consalvo (2007), game literacies include knowledge about games, but also gaming culture, such as the agents, and relations between agents, who engage in this culture. Salen (2007) argued that we must go beyond a focus on how games work and consider gaming literacies, with an emphasis on the verb. For Salen, gaming literacies emerged from a gaming attitude, a stance tied directly to play. Thus, gaming literacies are about the literacies and learning that take place in and around the play experience. Zimmerman (2009) argued for bringing videogame literacies back to questions of culture, and in doing so recognises their role as tools for kinds of literacy practices. An emphasis on practices situated in real contexts is evident throughout these various positions, and it is this notion that has typified much of the case-study research in this space.

The opening up of concepts like literature (Eagleton, 1983) and culture (Williams, 1953) throughout the latter half of the 20th century has allowed literacy researchers and educators to experiment with what we might call ‘non-traditional’ classroom texts. Accounts of teachers working with digital games as central objects of play and study are becoming more common (Beavis et al., 2017; Beavis et al., 2012; Gerber & Adams, 2014). Interventionist case studies have used digital games to: increase the literacy levels of low-achieving students
(Glover-Adams, 2009), explore how interactivity impacts meaning-making during gameplay (Bacalja, 2018b), motivate girls’ literacy practices through the use of Minecraft (Marcon & Faulkner, 2016), study gameplay and game-design to comprehend science fiction and fantasy storyworlds (Rish, 2014), and to support engagement and comprehension of more typically literary texts (Marlatt, 2018; Russell & Beavis, 2012).

A smaller body of digital game literacies research has focussed more explicitly on learning and teaching orientated towards Critical Digital Literacies objectives. Exploring questions of representation, power and ideology, some studies have reported instances where videogames were used to question representations of the world. Beavis and Charles (2005) described a study where students used Sims to create and play games that focused on domestic spaces. Participant interviews revealed students were scaffolded towards reflecting on their game-making and game-playing practices, and what these revealed about questions of gender, housework and domesticity. Berger & Mc Dougall’s (2013) UK study of an A-Level English class used the film noir game L.A. Noire, to draw attention to questions of gender. Student made links across the game and other literature to explain the ways that women and different ethnicities were represented. Bacalja (2018a) also reported the use of critical questioning to challenge students to interrogate the belief and value systems shrouded by the entertaining interactivity in the game Bully. Marlatt’s (2018) study empowered students to design games and gameworlds, and to then reflect on how multimodal and design elements contribution to the construction of meaning and ideology. One Latino student, Yem, recreated scenes from The Outsider, resisting the novel’s privileging of male leads and an all-white cast, instead producing people of colour and females as active leads. Along with other studies focussed on how digital games work, and how their construction positions audiences in particular ways (Apperley & Beavis, 2011; Bacalja, 2018a; Walsh, 2010), what has emerged is an evolving field interested in developing critical orientations to this new media.

The Study
The decision to collaborate with two middle-year high school campuses on a digital games curriculum occurred after a leader at one of those schools heard me speaking on a national radio program about the benefits of bringing digital games into the English classroom for play and study (Nichols, 2018). Red River High School (RRHS) (all
names used are pseudonyms) is located in a regional Australian town with relatively high levels of unemployment and low levels of higher-education completion amongst the adult population. Private schools in the area tend to attract high socio-economic and aspirational families, contributing to high concentrations of disadvantage at the two campuses of RRHS.

The literacy leaders at RRHS and I worked together to design a Unit that incorporated numerous forms of Indigenous storytelling with digital game literacies for the English classroom, motivated by the research question: how can the play and study of digital games in the English classroom support the teaching of Indigenous storytelling? We began with a discussion about the goals of the new Unit (increasing engagement, building knowledge about Indigenous Australians, developing understanding about how digital games work). This was followed by brainstorming activities about the capabilities of the student and teacher population at the school. We realised that game choice would be an important factor. We needed a game that was interesting enough to engage students, explored Indigenous content and themes, and simple enough for teachers to play and embrace, but which also met government restrictions regarding parental controls.

Students studied two texts comparatively for six weeks. The first text, *Never Alone* (Upper One Games, 2014) is a side-scroller puzzle game steeped in traditional Alaskan Native stories associated with the culture and values of the Inupiat community. Designed in consultation with Cook Inlet Tribal Council, a pioneering Alaskan Native tribal organization, and E-Line Media, a leading developer and publisher of digital games that engage and empower, players take on the roles of Nuna, a young Inupiat girl and her companion, an arctic fox, as they search for the source of an endless blizzard that is threatening her village. The second text, *Dust Echoes* (ABC, 2005), was a series of animated Australian Indigenous stories from central Arnhem land, telling tales of love, loyalty, and Aboriginal custom and law, and available online for free streaming.

Data collection occurred across the entirety of the program and included individual and group interviews with students and teachers, and the collection of curriculum materials and student work samples. The analysis of this data was supported through the use of a computer-assisted data analysis tool, NVivo, which facilitated the identification of themes which were then adopted as codes to classify and categorise the data. Theory-driven and data-driven coding (Boyatzis, 1998), the former referring to codes derived from prior hypotheses or existing
theory, and the latter capturing themes which emerged inductively as a result of reading and reviewing raw data, supported analysis. The co-design of the Unit produced classroom activities which all teachers were invited to adopt and adapt these as they saw fit. Activities included:

- Analysing the game poster
- Double-entry journal writing to record key moments of gameplay
- Character mapping
- Story mapping
- Deconstructing genre
- Discussion of types and purposes of narration
- Building knowledge about Indigenous cultures
- Brainstorming themes
- Comparing print-based and non-print-based versions of the two stories
- Examining multimodality
- Digital literacy design skills.

The critical literacies component of the unit was interested in supporting students to develop a critical stance towards digital games. The Critical Digital Literacies we aspired to develop included those “skills and practices that lead to the interrogation of digital media texts” (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, 2012). This would necessitate an understanding of ‘genres of power’, including the functioning of multimodal semiotic systems, and the specialised ways these systems, beyond the purely linguistic, contribute to understanding how texts work (Luke, 2012). We wanted our students to understand that digital games are not neutral texts and that they have been constructed in particular ways with specific purposes in mind.

This analysis below is structured utilising Allan Luke’s (2000) account of Australian critical literacies. Recognising that critical literacies education takes on inextricably local forms when realised in practice, Luke argued that an Australian redefinition of critical literacy focuses on:

- teaching and learning how texts work,
- understanding and re-mediating what texts attempt to do in the world and to people, and
- moving students towards active “position-takings” with texts to critique and reconstruct the social fields in which they live and work (p. 451).
Findings related to each of these characteristics are discussed below, firstly in terms of students, and secondly in terms of teachers.

**Student Perspectives**
Three participants from the study, Ned, Braydon and Andrew, help us explore the local forms of critical literacy that were evident in the study. All three of these fourteen-year-old boys self-identified as avid gamers who owned multiple gaming consoles and played regularly with family and friends. While interviews with these students revealed they were confident and articulate communicators, who could engage thoughtfully and respectfully during the group interview process, all were generally disengaged and disinterested with the English classroom, a conclusion supported by their own reflections on the subject and the views of their classroom teacher.

**How Games Work**
These students demonstrated knowledge about the function of specific semiotic systems and game features, albeit limiting their analysis to decoding the text and exploring the writers/developer’s intended meanings. For example, a discussion about the importance of characters in *Never Alone* led Ned and Andrew to focus on the impact of game graphics on representation. Speaking about the game’s protagonist, Nuna, portrayed as a young girl who the player controls while navigating the story, Ned said “In the game she looks more like a guy...because the animators have gone down with the graphics on the iPad.” The notion that visual graphics impact how characters are represented and, therefore, perceived by the audience, is elaborated by Andrew, who draws comparisons between dedicated gaming consoles that have the capacity to create visually sophisticated characters and hand-held mobile playing devices which lack this capacity. In this instance, these students ignored the significance of the decision made by the game’s developers to represent Nuna as a girl, despite activities during the Unit exploring the original story on which the game is based, which portrays the protagonist as a boy.

Another semiotic system identified by students as contributing to how games work was sound effects. Braydon elaborated on the way meaning is communicated through design in his summative assessment task, a video essay, when commenting on the similarities between the game and the animated short film from the Dust Echoes series, *The Be*. He stated:
They both used animated graphics to show the story and various sound effects. For example, in *The Be*...they use sound effects that sound like an Australian forest. Just like in *Never Alone* where the developers used the sound of strong wind to emphasise the presence of the blizzard.

Here, Braydon implied a degree of intentionality on the part of the creators of both texts suggesting the incorporation of sound has a meaningful and affective purpose. Ned explored this same idea about intentional game design to achieve affective responses in his commentary on the way sound was used in the game to invoke an emotional response from the audience. Ned recounted how sound associated with the death of the arctic fox, who accompanies Nuna everywhere she goes, had an impact on others in the classroom when this event occurred on iPads which had the volume turned up. This demonstrated an understanding of the role played by various modalities in constructing the story but also how these modalities operated to connect the audience to the game’s story.

There were few occasions of students exploring the distinct features of digital games. One example where this did occur was in discussion about cut-scenes. This feature of digital games typically suspends the interactive component of play and shifts to a filmic mode which positions the gamer as passive viewer. As the game player reaches checkpoints throughout *Never Alone* they unlock cut scenes which show real Inupiat elders discussing aspects of tribal life. Braydon, after being asked which parts of the story interested him, discussed the value and function of the cut-scenes, “The little cut-scenes were good. They explained the story even more. They add why it was so important.” Braydon recognised the distinction between the story as experienced through play and the comprehension of the story’s context, facilitated by elders positioning the game’s events within social, cultural and historical contexts.

**What Games Attempt To Do in the World**

Discussion about what digital games attempt to do in the world addressed the cultural and ideological function of gaming practices broadly, as well as gaming practices as they were scaffolded during the Unit. As a regional school in a geographic area with a high number of Indigenous people and a strong history of using curricula to engage with the history and culture of Indigenous ancestors, students had become accustomed to studying texts for the purpose of developing
knowledge about different cultural groups. When asked why the game developers focused on the story of Nuna in *Never Alone*, students referenced the cultural function of digital games. Braydon said: “[The purpose] is to get the stories heard. It’s an indigenous story and it’s from an Alaskan indigenous group.” Given the centrality of audience and purpose to the study of novels and other print-media in English classrooms, we should not be surprised that Braydon could identify this goal of the game. This was no doubt also supported by teaching and learning activities which focussed on developing student knowledge about the context of the game, specifically the social and cultural practices of Inuit communities.

Ned identified two complementary functions that the game served. Firstly, he linked the play and study of the game in the classroom to the completion of assessment tasks, a central activity of subject-English, saying students could “take the knowledge from the game to use it in their assessments”. Ned also recognised that one of the key purposes of text study was to use these stories to understand other cultures and their customs. When asked about why games like *Never Alone* should be studied in English, he said that students “would learn about the Inupiat people and take that into consideration and not say slurs like some people say”. Ned identified the power that all texts have to change behaviours, the hope being that learning more about Inuit tribal groups through traversing a digital landscape that captures their cultural systems will counter the use of stereotypes or ‘slurs’ to describe these peoples.

**Moving Students to Resistant Positions**

Using digital games to reposition students towards resistant position-takings was not a priority of the Unit, nor was there much evidence that students had begun to see their gaming practices as a form of political engagement. For all the understandings reported above, many of the most important ways that digital games position audiences were absent from discussion or classroom activities. Knowledge about game economics (Castronova, 2008), game advertising (Jenkins, 2006b), media mixing and cross-media franchises (Jenkins, 2006a), the role of hacking and modding (Boluk & LeMieux, 2017), game addition and ‘emotioneering’ (Freeman, 2004), and data literacies (Pangrazio & Selwyn, 2019) were absent from learning and teaching activities.

**Teacher Perspectives**
Luke's (2000) tripartite description of critical literacy in Australia can also be employed to analyse how five teachers from the study, Kristy, Sally, Callum, Adam, and Kerry, constructed Critical Digital Literacies.

**How Games Work**

The challenge of supporting students to understand how games work was addressed by teachers largely through existing pedagogical and philosophical approaches to literary texts which focussed on reading practices, and more specifically, close and repeated readings. The idea that a focus on reading practices might equip students with the means of analysing the ways readers are positioned by texts has long been a focus of critical literacy, with an emphasis on using multiple readings to make visible the gaps and silences in texts and to challenge the political and ideological messages that they often mask (Patterson, 1990, p. 28). Numerous teachers identified the value of close and repeated readings (as well as repeated playings) as tools to develop new understandings.

Comments from two teachers, Kristy and Sally, revealed the perceived benefit of close and repeated readings but also two perspectives differently interested in the critical. Kristy, an experienced English teacher, highlighted the potential value of repeat playings in the classroom suggesting that, “if you get to play a couple of times, you get different things through it.” Presumably, different game outcomes and different interpretations of these outcomes might be produced. For Sally, new to English teaching, analysing games closely was important because it helped students understand how “technology tells stories”. Sally suggested that as a result of an increased emphasis on multimodal texts, and the role played by technology in mediating storytelling in everyday life, there was value in “students understanding how technology helps us read and understand the world.” While Kristy’s emphasis is on repeated playings for new understandings that need not necessarily lean towards more critical perspectives, and are more closely tied to principles of close readings that emphasis repetition to develop ‘deeper’ understanding, Sally, a teacher less tied to the historical imperatives of textual analysis, was more interested in broader ideas about the effects of technology (more detail regarding teacher control over gameplay during the study has been addressed elsewhere (Bacalja & Clark, 2020).

**What Games Attempt To Do in the World**
There was a marked disparity between the ability of teachers to recognise the social and cultural dimensions of digital games and their willingness to incorporate this into their teaching in the form of critical literacy activities. Enthusiasm for the engagement and entertainment function games might serve in the English classroom appeared to overwhelm concerns about the ideological dimensions of the technology or questions about power and authority associated with gaming literacies more generally.

For example, several teachers referenced the gendered nature of literate practice during the study. Sally commented on the benefits of studying games for boys in her class. She said:

> With boys being pretty disengaged with English and reading a lot of the time, I think even just having the one game in there, here’s something as a boy, that they can engage with and use the technology and actually use those skills.

Callum, a teacher openly opposed to the notion that digital games had any value in any setting, also commented on improved levels of engagement, stating, “the boys far outweighed the girls as in they wanted to play the game and they wanted to get to the end.” These sentiments were typical of a discourse which recognised digital game literacies as activity more likely to be enjoyed and ‘mastered’ by boys. However, the notion that the study of games might be more attractive to one group of students was not linked back to questions of pedagogy and how this might become a focus of study. There were no activities which focussed on gendered gameplay or highlighted issues of digital game design for particular genders, despite research suggesting that females represent 47% of all gamers (Brand et al., 2019, p. 7). Due to the overwhelming focus on the world inside the game, attempts to explore with students how these texts encouraged particular practices outside of the gameworld were largely ignored. Case studies which have sought to bring questions of gender and digital gameplay the focus for students have found that young people can be scaffolded into investigating relationships between gender, game design and gameplay (Beavis & Charles, 2005; Berger & Mcdougall, 2013).

While several teachers expressed concerns with violent digital games, there was no mention of this being a focus of critical discussion during the Unit. Concerns the graphic imagery in games were cited by Adam, another experienced English teacher, who expressed concern with gameplay that typically involved “blood splashing everywhere”,...
and a recognition that many games could not be used in classrooms for play and study due to their high levels of simulated violence, highlighted an awareness of the sometimes troubling nature of the content which appears in games but which was not deemed worthy of classroom attention.

**Moving Students to Resistant Positions**
What was noticeable in the data was a lack of emphasis on learning and teaching which aimed to move students towards resistant reading positions. The lack of emphasis on critically-orientated intervention activities might be attributed to the pressure teachers reported to prepare students for high-stakes testing regimes and the impact this had on their perception of a range of literacy skills. The skills identified by teachers as important were also those skills valued by high-stakes testing regimes, which in the Australian context, are largely void of critical skills. The types of analysis and understandings of texts that teachers were focussed on developing were those that could be bridged to traditional text-types. Kerry was one teacher who spoke of a digital games curriculum as offering great potential for teaching and learning. A younger teacher, focussed on keeping students at school and interested in learning, Kerry has been involved in every stage of the design of the Unit, and spoke positively to colleagues during faculty meetings about the Unit. However, when reflecting on the Unit in her post-intervention interview, she also lamented major obstacles to this kind of literacy work, stating that schooling had become “all about getting results.” Kerry went on to capture the heavy weight of expectation associated with externally-mandated assessment that determines what counts, saying, “it’s a bit hard to think about what kind of new units to put in because if you’re not hitting these goals with NAPLAN², then your school has to sit there and go, ‘Why?’” As Frawley and Mclean Davies (2015) have found, the impact of assessment regimes raises questions about how they change the literary field and impact teachers’ concept of disciplinarity. This sentiment reflects the complex relationship Australian teachers have historically had with critical literacy (Gutierrez, 2013).

**Praxis and Redesign**
What is clear from the above analysis is that the degree of student praxis, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it (Freire, 1972), was negligible. Ávila and Zacher Pandya’s (2012) belief
that CDL praxis is “twofold, investigating manifestations of power relations in texts, and then designing, and redesigning, texts in ways that serve other, less powerful goals” (p. 2), provides a useful reminder for those wishing to produce the type of critical consciousness long advocated by critical literacy scholars. Despite the best intentions of the RHHS teaching team to experiment with novel and innovative teaching and learning, engaging with students' lifeworlds to develop a critical orientation towards a 21st century text, we struggled to move students towards CDL practices. In order to achieve the kinds of critical praxis articulated by Ávila and Zacher Pandya (2012), Freire (2000), and others, redesign is essential, necessitating new frameworks for thinking and action.

Responding to calls for new frameworks with which to explore new digital literacies (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, 2012; Coiro et al., 2008) Luci Pangrazio (2016, 2019) has reconceptualised Critical Digital Literacies. Her “Critical Digital Design” approach responds to the major hurdles reported by those seeking to scaffold a critical digital disposition, including tensions between:
- the ideological and the personal
- collective and individual practices, and
- technical mastery and a critical disposition.

Rather than focusing on specific technologies, she identified four strategies that might constitute a “Critical Digital Design”: critical self-reflection, interpretation and re-articulation, creativity and visualisation, and transcendental critique. I employ each of the strategies to engage in my own praxis and ‘redesign’ of the Unit taught at RRHS.

**Critical Self-Reflection**

The strategy of critical self-reflection involves exploring the relationship between personal, affective responses to digital texts and broader ideological concerns. Pangrazio (2016) advocated for using the personal as a conduit for the ideological. Strategies targeted at critical self-reflection begin with an analysis of personal digital practices which, through analysis, discovery and provocation, become objectified. Thus, learners move beyond a simple cataloguing of their prior experiences and towards a focus on how these practices are shaped by particular digital discourses. This will likely involve some degree of discomfort as social and political issues are drawn into the exploration and linked to individual practices.
Implementing digital games into the English classroom should begin with an explicit focus on prior experiences with digital games and digital game paratexts. Paratexts are those texts which sit neither entirely inside or outside of a text but which informs its reading. In gaming terms, paratexts can refer to all of those digital literacies that relate to gameplay but which are outside of the game, for example, watching others play the game, and reading guides to gameplay, purchasing game add-ons or upgrades. Students can be asked to recall and organise these practices into categories (games played, who they played with, how much they played, how they felt). Comparisons between the practices and affective responses can help identify similarities and differences that become the catalyst for discussion about identity and identity making.

The next stage is moving students towards critical reflection. Questioning from teachers will play an important role here as students are directed to consider aspects of the games they play and the platforms that support these games, which they may otherwise have taken for granted. Questions to consider could include:

- Who owns the platform on which you play games? How do they benefit?
- What kinds of characters are missing from the game you play? What does this tell you about what the game developers think about these people?
- What are the main themes of the games you know? How are these themes similar or different to themes in other media you engage with? What themes are missing?

The aim must be squarely on students coming to their own critical consciousness regarding digital game practices. Here, the emphasis on ‘self-reflection’ is crucial. As such, careful consideration about the critical questions and how learners might be placed in ‘safe’ peer groupings for the purposes of sharing and discussing self-critiques is essential.

**Interpretation and Re-articulation of Digital Concepts**

The language which we use to talk about digital technologies influences how we conceive of them. Pangrazio (2016) suggested there is value in discussing the rhetoric that shapes the way we think about digital media. Often this rhetoric develops positive associations that conceal more complex and confronting issues of digital media use. Making this rhetoric overt and exploring how and why phrases have
been redefined in the digital context will assist in the rearticulation of language, providing opportunities for counter hegemonic discourse. In other words, newfound knowledge will enable transforming current symbols and icons to scaffold critique.

While the language and concepts associated with the study of print-based literature are well-established, the novelty of digital game study provides a more fluid space and a greater degree of uncertainty regarding what the concepts of the digital game classroom are and what media-specific language should form the basis of learning and teaching. This presents an optimal starting point for teachers: working with students to brainstorm the language and concepts that we use to talk about games and gaming. Key terms for initial discussion could include: digital games, online gaming, multiplayer gaming, first-person shooters, open-world play, micro-transactions, modding and dlc. Shifting students from definitions to an exploration of the practices associated with these terms represents an important step in realising how language can (mis)represent the practices they capture.

For example, numerous students from the study discussed their preference for open-world games because of the agency and choice that these games provided. Terms like ‘open-world’ and ‘sandbox’ are not ideologically neutral. The former alludes to opportunities for creativity and exploration, while the latter derives from childhood sandboxes that are associated with creativity, happiness and growth. These terms hide the constructedness of all games from this genre and the ways that game developers and gamers bring their own dispositions to the gameworld in ways that limit what is possible. Engaging in a sandbox game in the classroom and then reflecting on this practice, as has been done by others (Bacalja, 2018b; Beavis & Charles, 2005) would provide the material for rearticulating these concepts in order to support students to develop counter hegemonic discourses.

Creativity and Visualisation

To move students towards more critical orientations towards digital media, we should embrace a range of cognitive tools. Visualisation and the physical work that promotes affective responses from learners can help users translate digital practices by capturing and recording them in creative ways. Pangrazio (2019) has used this approach with young people, through physical acts of folding, painting and modelling, to open up new ways of thinking about digital media. Visualisation
represents another tool that can decontextualize and defamiliarize otherwise taken-for-granted digital texts, tools, and practices.

Beginning with embodied pedagogies that leverage physical creative work, teachers in our study could have used craft paper and coloured markers to capture and visualise the *Never Alone* gameworld and its characters. Sketching the game screen, identifying the various communicative components on this screen and annotating the function each serves would allow students to ‘see’ aspects of design otherwise obscured by engaging play. Likewise, creating a physical timeline of the story’s main events and recording the characters who appear and disappear across this timeline would make overt the ideological decisions underpinning the story.

Students could also be encouraged to mindmap the various paratexts associated with the game. The intentionality of designed digital networks can be forgotten through the ubiquitous nature of hyperlinks, yet, bringing these networks to the fore and discussing the purpose each serves would allow students to conceive of them in new ways. New networks could then be designed and justified, incorporating new learnings about the digital concepts and digital networks to redesign digital game literacies with social justice outcomes in mind.

**Transcendental Critique**

The ephemeral nature of information and practice in digital networks can produce challenges to establishing separate spaces with which to study these phenomena. Once digital technologies are embedded in everyday life it becomes harder to evaluate their purpose and function (Pangrazio, 2019, p. 153). Creating distance from digital media can contribute to transcendental critique through activities and provocations which decontextualize everyday digital media use (Pangrazio, 2016, p. 171). This can assist students by revealing the structures and architecture of platforms, media-systems and networks that can then allow individuals to make informed choices about future practice, thus providing the knowledge and tools for change and transformation.

While gameplay is an essential component of videogame literacies, creating distance from these literacies can enable a more reflective pattern of thought. Revealing the structures of digital games and digital game industries through creativity and visualisation can provide the impetus for students to adopt a position external to play to examine social and political issues. Showing students the gaming
practices of other gamers, and providing debate-style activities with which to interrogate these practices, can support students to critically reflect on personal digital practices and identities. Transcendental critique can also be achieved by showing: through activities and provocations that decontextualize taken-for-granted game characters and behaviours. First-person shooter games, where the player take on the role of a protagonist who uses weapons to make progress through a game, typically entail male protagonists narrowly constructed through white, aggressive, and violent behaviours. Collecting, comparing and contrasting screenshots, or short videos, of selected characters that represent this genre alongside male characters from a range of other media that present a broader range of masculinities, can help students develop perspectives that would otherwise be almost impossible through digital game literacies limited to gameplay.

**Conclusion**

The experience of working with a committed group of teachers to bring an everyday digital text into the English classroom for critical study has demonstrated the obstacles faced by those interested in Critical Digital Literacies. The capacity of digital games to engage and motivate makes it difficult to shift users into critical positions. Furthermore, the novel nature of these texts and their associated literate practices means it is likely that many educators will lack the knowledge necessary to confidently scaffold deconstruction or to place digital games within relevant social and cultural contexts.

Future research is needed which places digital game literacies as the central objects of study. It is unlikely that the popularity of games will diminish any time soon. Nor is it likely that the ways that digital game practices, or the representations which games produce, will position audiences any less problematically. While research in this area will continue to represent ‘risky’ business, especially given public discourse every time a new controversial game is released, if the desire is for young people to possess critical dispositions that empower them to interrogate the power relations in texts, and to then "design and redesign texts in ways that serve other less powerful interests" (Ávila & Zacher Pandya, 2012, p. 3), then more attention to 'how' teachers scaffold these outcomes is needed.

Models like Pangrazio’s 'Critical Digital Design', with its emphasis on critical self-reflection, interpretation and re-articulation, creativity and visualisation, and transcendental critique, represent a great starting point for those educators wishing to engage in CDL praxis. It
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also shows how we can sustain border crossing, through reflecting and re-examining CDL interventions.

Notes

1 Side scroller games, or horizontal scrolling games, typically involve gameplay viewed from a side-view camera angle, where the onscreen characters generally move from left to right on the screen, as they move across the gameworld.

2 The National Assessment Programs – Literacy and Numeracy is Australia’s mandated testing program focussed on basic skills and administered annually.

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