

# Resistance and reconciliation – Negotiating videogame play and study through the lens of the English classroom

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on a research project incorporating videogames into the English classroom for play and study. Videogames have long been lauded for their capacity to engage audiences through immersive gameplay and rich narratives (Gee 2004). This work tends to privilege the interactive elements of gameplay and the impact of rich textual environments as facilitators of a range of literacy practices. This study explores the extent to which games can be studied as text within current curriculum frames, demonstrating how curriculum requirements for English enable some videogame features to be adopted and adapted for integration, whilst others are excluded.

## **Keywords**

Digital Games, subject-English, curriculum, digital literacy, games-based learning, pedagogy.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Videogame literacies theory focuses on features of narrative and immersion to establish the learning benefits associated with playing videogames (Salen 2008). This body of work highlights the affordances which emerge as a result of a range of textual features connected to videogames, including choice, immersion, identity-work, collaborative practice, interactivity, narrative and play.

More recently, attention has turned to the potential of videogames to be included as texts for study in school-based contexts. This shift can be characterised by a focus on teaching and learning *about* games, as opposed to learning *through* games. In the context of literacy and subject-English, work in this area has emphasised: games as text and games as action (Beavis 2014); multimodality (Burn 2016); learning through game design (Pelletier et al 2010); developing critical stances towards games (Bacalja 2018); and the flow of meaning from students' lifeworlds into the game, and vice-versa (Apperley 2010). Despite growing interest in the positioning of videogames as texts, case-study research demonstrating how videogames might be included in school-based contexts within existing curriculum frameworks has been limited.

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This paper reports findings from a study integrating one videogame, *Never Alone* (Upper One Games 2014), into a Year 8 English context at two regional Victorian high-schools. A unit of work focussed on the study of indigenous stories across multiple text-types was devised, including a sustained study of *Never Alone* as a text. Students completed reading, writing and playing activities aimed at supporting their understanding of the ways that multiple modes can be engaged to construct and communicate the intention of the text designer. The unit involved the co-construction of curriculum documents between teachers at the base-schools and the researcher, sensitive to contextual factors related to teacher knowledge and curriculum demands.

Findings from the case study are presented, with an emphasis on resistance and reconciliation. Resistance came from those teachers and students who challenged the use of the videogames in the English classroom for play and study and struggled to conceive of the subject as providing the appropriate space for this kind of textual work. This revealed contrasting views about what English is for, and what purpose videogames might serve within these classrooms. Reconciliation was evident in the ways that teachers formed connections between the distinctive features of videogames and the requirements of the curriculum. Historical approaches to English were found to be compatible with some features of these texts, demonstrating how videogames could be leveraged, beyond engagement, to support student mastery of the curriculum. The paper addresses questions about the cultural capital necessary to achieve academic distinction (Bourdieu 1986) in the videogame-English classroom, arguing that this requires a combination of gaming capital (Walsh and Apperley 2009) and discipline specific knowledge associated with subject English.

As educators grapple with the possibilities for learning through games, this paper shows that the imperatives of curriculum documents associated with subject-English make videogames a text worthy of study. Teachers are already experimenting with using these texts in rigorous and meaningful ways. What's next in this space is for this work to be documented, shared and challenged, to inform future games research in educational contexts.

## **BIO**

Alex Bacalja is a Lecturer in language and literacy and coordinates the English Method and Literacy subjects within the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program. He has worked for over a decade in secondary schools across Melbourne in both teaching and leadership roles. Alex's research focuses on contemporary literacies, including the digital literacies taught and practiced in school and work environments. His recently published PhD studied the place of video game literacies within the context of subject-English teaching.

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