

Game-centred school learning: It's (not) in the game

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INTRODUCTION

Discourses which advocate for the use of digital games in schools as technologies for learning have become common. One characteristic of these discourses has been rhetoric which simultaneously establishes school learning in deficit terms and then offers digital games as the solution. Seymour Papert's (1980) early theorising of the benefits of immersion in microworlds as a means to explore complex ideas, James Gee's (2003) analysis of what constitutes 'good' games for learning, Marc Prensky's (2007) emphasis on 'learning by doing' through play, and Kafai and Burke's (2016) claims about constructivist game making, typify the kinds of arguments that construct game-centred solutions as the means to fundamentally shift the landscape of formal schooling.

However, critical studies of educational technology challenge the unproblematic incorporation of such technologies into school environments. Such scholarship analyses the social, cultural and political aspects of digital media in educational contexts (Macgilchrist 2021), questioning taken for granted assumptions about potential impacts. Research specifically exploring digital games and schooling from critical perspectives highlights the tendency to overestimate the force of the technology (for example, see Sims 2017; Ito 2009). One response to mediating the often overly optimistic claims and promises that accompany game-based learning discourses is to adopt what Koutsogiannis and Adampa (2022) refer to as a critical post-videogaming perspective, where the potentialities of digital games are considered in terms of the complex socio-cultural and historical contexts within which educators seek to use them.

This paper focuses on the tensions between the potentialities of game-centred school learning and socio-cultural and historical contexts by exploring one school's efforts to integrate digital games into their senior English curriculum. The context of this study was a senior high school in a major Australian city. Over two years, I worked with one teacher at the school to co-design a semester-length course which replaced the novels, poetry and films that were typically used to negotiate the curriculum with four digital games (*Unpacking*, *Stanley's Parable*, *Firewatch*, & *The Beginner's Guide*). Data collected included interviews with the participating teacher and with students studying the course, curriculum materials (such as lesson plans and assessment tasks), student work samples, and government policies.

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Analysis of data was guided by Foucault's work on relations of power (1980). Foucault argues that power is not an entity that is given or taken, but rather strictly relational. Every relation between forces is a power relation, where force exists not as a single entity but in relation with other forces" (Truth and Power, 1980b). Thus, power cannot exist other than as a function of multiple points of resistance. Focussing on the specific practices that constitute, and are constituted, across these multiple points, provides one way to explore how the possibilities of the game-centred classroom require educators to look beyond claims which imply that improved schooling learning is solely 'in the game'

In this paper I will focus on four relations of power evident in the data. The first relation reflects the dynamic between digital games and school structures, exploring how game design becomes entangled with the organisation of school learning in ways that cannot escape assessment requirements and the temporal constraints of school timetables. The second relation addresses the connection between student practice and the disciplinary field of subject-English. Here, student gameplay and study exist in tension with historically constituted ideas about the study of English. The third relation attends to the relationship between school culture and teacher agency, demonstrating how teachers internalise perceived expectations regarding what constitutes 'good' teaching and learning which then mediates how digital games are leveraged for school learning. Finally, the relations of power between state education policy and interpretations of said policy at the school level illustrate how government mandates about what constitutes legitimate education is always in tension with local efforts to make sense of such mandates, where the relation between the two informs the boundaries of games as technologies for disciplinary learning.

While there is no shortage of rhetoric lauding the possibilities for digital games to alter the dynamics of schooling, this study suggests that the design of individual games is just one factor in a complex web of social and cultural practices in local arenas. The paper's interest in the relations of power suggests that attention to the multiple factors, and their dynamic relations, represents an important consideration for all educators interested in game-centred teaching and learning.

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BIO

Alexander Bacalja (PhD) is a senior lecturer in literacy and English teaching and member of the Language and Literacy Research Hub, at the University of Melbourne. After beginning his career as a secondary English teacher, Alex has been involved in Initial Teacher Education for almost a decade, coordinating secondary English and Literacy subjects for the Master of Teaching (Secondary) program. His research interests include the impact of digital technologies, especially digital games, on the literacy practices of young people, and English curriculum and policy development.