

Navigating Narratives and *Night in the Woods*: Teaching Videogames in the English Curriculum

Premeet Sidhu

The University of Sydney
Games and Play Lab
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia
premeet.sidhu@sydney.edu.au

Jen Scott Curwood, Marcus Carter

The University of Sydney
Games and Play Lab
Camperdown, NSW, 2006
Australia
js.curwood@sydney.edu.au , marcus.carter@sydney.edu.au

Keywords

Videogames, game-based learning, *Night in the Woods*, pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Games can be catalysts for powerful learning experiences in various play contexts and disciplines. The integration of videogames in the English curriculum offers educators and students the opportunity to experience and critically analyse multimodal narratives which facilitate the development of literacy and transform understandings of literature (e.g., Altura & Curwood 2015; Bacalja 2018; Burn 2021; Ostenson 2013). Despite substantial scholarship highlighting the educational potential of game-based learning (e.g., Gee 2003; McGonigal 2011; Schrier et al. 2024; Squire 2011), educators hold polarised views on the role and validity of gaming for classroom learning (e.g., Gutierrez et al. 2023; von Gillern et al. 2024). To better understand the implications of game-based pedagogy and learning, our research examines the contemporary experiences of both educators and students.

METHODS

This presentation reports findings from a co-design partnership between The University of Sydney, videogame development company Secret Lab, and an independent secondary school in Sydney. The aim of the partnership was to integrate the videogame *Night in the Woods* (Infinite Fall & Secret Lab 2017) into the English curriculum to explore the potential for videogames to address student engagement with complex long-form narrative texts.

Study participants included nine educators with varied levels of classroom experience and 168 Year 7 students across 10 streamed classes. Educators co-designed teaching and learning materials with researchers (see **Image 1** on the next page), delivered the videogame-based English unit, and participated in pre-study and post-study interviews that asked them to reflect on their experiences and student learning.

Proceedings of DiGRA Australia 2025

© 2025 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

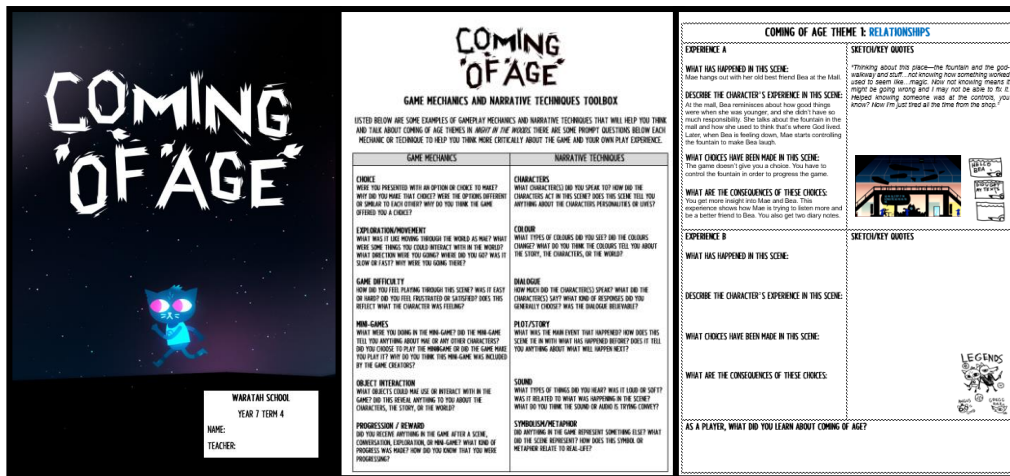


Image 1. Sample pages of the co-designed student work booklet including literacy activities linked to key gameplay moments.

Students engaged in scaffolded formative and summative literacy activities and gameplay aimed at enriching their understanding of complex multimodal narrative texts. A representative sample of the cohort was interviewed throughout the delivery of the unit. Qualitative data was collected from two co-design workshops with researchers and educators, multiple interviews with educators and students, a student focus group, and classroom observations over a six-week period. Informed by a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz 2006), data underwent iterative rounds of thematic analysis via open coding, axial coding, and memo writing, which allowed key themes to emerge naturally from the data (Saldaña 2013).

THE VISIBILITY OF GAMING LITERACIES

Despite the deep levels of engagement observed in the classroom, and enthusiasm expressed towards videogame-based learning, a prominent theme that emerged from preliminary data analysis relates to the perceived discrepancy between multimodal literacy and game-based literacy. Though both are similar in function, conventions, and literary techniques, both educators and students expressed difficulty in communicating game-based knowledge and learning.

Both educator and student reflections align with existing research that articulates how narrative-driven games can enhance student engagement (Theodoulou & Curwood 2023). For example, one educator commented that there was “a lot of positive engagement [from students], despite some of the gaps in their knowledge and experience.” Similarly, one student emphasised that their cohort was “way more into [Night in the Woods]” than their previous film-based English unit. However, both educators and students conveyed the difficulty in connecting understandings of gameplay to established literary techniques or narrative conventions. One educator noted that they “found the unit challenging to teach due to the lack of knowledge of game mechanics,” and some students vaguely commented in their interviews that they did not learn much about narrative structures or game mechanics. However, this is in opposition to the observed demonstration of multimodal and gaming literacy through discussion of concepts such as “dialogue options,” “game audio,” and “character relationships,” in student booklets and the final assessment task (see Image 2 on the next page). This cognitive dissonance between the *acquisition* and *evidence* of gaming literacy and knowledge points towards the necessity of developing a formal framework for teaching and analysing games in learning environments.

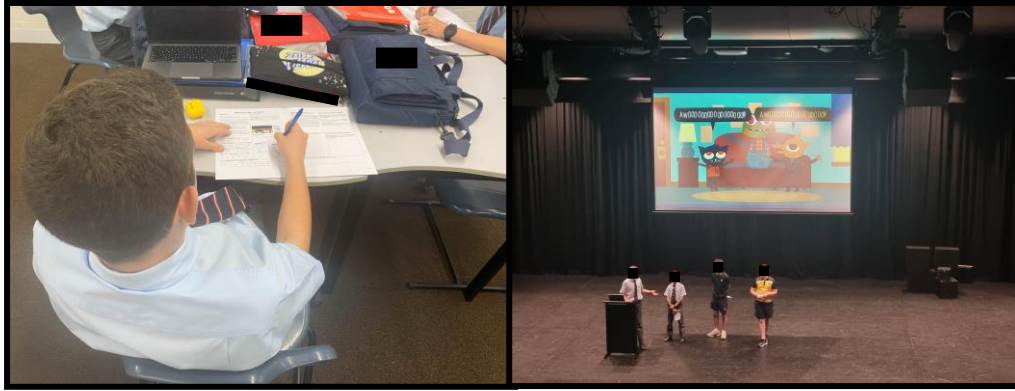


Image 2. On the left-hand side is a photograph of a student writing in the co-designed game booklet during English class. On the right-hand side is a photograph of a group of students presenting a “Shark Tank” style pitch in front of their cohort for their final assessment.

CONCLUSION

One of the participants in our study aptly summarised that “educators need to be realistic that the world our students are living in is surrounded by gaming.” Whilst games can be powerful catalysts for learning, formal language and pedagogical frameworks that help explicate and make game-based learning visible in alignment with curriculum requirements is necessary. As education and curricula continue to shift towards the digital, and gaming practices and communities continue to grow, it is important and worthwhile to explore how to best support educators and students to engage with and analyse games in learning environments.

BIOS

Dr Premeet Sidhu is a research assistant at The University of Sydney. Her current research interests include the design and exploration of meaningful play and learning experiences through games. With Marcus Carter and José Zagal, she is the editor of *Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons* (MIT Press, 2024).

Dr Jen Scott Curwood is an Associate Professor of English Education at The University of Sydney in Australia. Her research explores the intersections of literacy, creativity, and technology in order to advance social change and build more sustainable futures.

Dr Marcus Carter is a Professor in Human-Computer Interaction at The University of Sydney. He presently holds an ARC Future Fellowship, and his research interests include children’s play, virtual reality, and emerging technologies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was financially supported by a University of Sydney Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences External Engagement Accelerator Grant.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Altura, G. J. & Curwood, J. S. 2015. Hitting Restart: Learning and Gaming in an Australian Classroom. *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 59, 1, 25-27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.438>
- Bacalja, A. 2018. What Critical Literacy Has to Offer the Study of Video Games. *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy*, 41, 3, 155–165. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03652016>
- Burn, A. 2021. *Literature, Videogames and Learning: Playing the Text*. Routledge.
- Charmaz, K. 2006. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. Sage Publications.
- Gee, J. P. 2003. *What Videogames Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- Gutierrez, A., Mills, K., Scholes, L., Rowe, L., & Pink, E. 2023. What Do Secondary Teachers Think About Digital Games for Learning: Stupid Fixation or the Future of Education? *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 133. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2023.104278>
- Infinite Fall & Secret Lab. 2017. *Night in the Woods*. Videogame. Finji.
- McGonigal, J. 2011. *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. Penguin Press.
- Ostenson, J. 2013. Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom. *The English Journal*, 102, 6, 71–78. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24484129>
- Saldaña, J. 2013. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. Sage Publications.
- Schrier, K., Kowert, R., Leonard, D., & Porkka-Kontturi, T. 2024. *Learning, Education, & Games Volume 4: 50 Games to Use for Inclusion, Equity, and Justice*. ETC Press.
- Squire, K. 2011. *Video Games and Learning: Teaching Participatory Culture in the Digital Age*. Teachers College Press.
- Theodoulou, J., & Curwood, J. S. 2023. Play the Game, Live the Story: Pushing Narrative Boundaries with Young Adult Videogames. *English Teaching: Practice and Critique*, 22, 2, 234-246. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ETPC-08-2022-0105>
- von Gillern, S., Olsen, A., Nash, B., & Stufft, C. 2024. An Examination of Teachers' Views on Video Games and Learning: Establishing the Games and Literacy Education (GALE) Scale. *Computers & Education*, 223. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2024.105155>