From *The Tempest* to *Tomb-Raider*
Computer Games in English, Media and Drama

Andrew Burn explores the ways in which the study of computer games can enhance our teaching of grammar, narrative, literature, culture and drama.

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Computer games are a controversial medium - it needs hardly repeating. They attract all the opprobrium previously reserved for video nasties, resurrect all the old debates about violent effects, induce suspicions about addictive, dumbed-down, antisocial behaviour which used to be levelled at television, and provoke moral and aesthetic panics about the blunting of young people's ethical and artistic sensibilities. It's worth reminding ourselves that we have heard all this before. Every new medium has attracted similar concerns, from Renaissance anxiety about the dangerous new habit of silent reading after the invention of the printing press, to nineteenth century concerns about the morally debilitating effects of reading novels; from mid-twentieth century worries about television and horror comics to late-twentieth century paranoia about the internet.

Visual culture

The history of English teaching has its own version of these worries. One of the most curious of these is a deep suspicion of visual media which ran through the period of Leavis's influence on school English. Denys Thompson and David Holbrook both condemned absolutely the visual culture of comicstrips and popular cinema as a cheapening, deadening influence, the enemy of the word, which for Thompson was the great tradition delineated by Leavis, for Holbrook was the authenticity of traditional folk culture.

This anxiety about the visual was not confined to conservative cultural theorists - even Raymond Williams, Leavis's great Marxist opponent, excludes horror films from his otherwise generous argument for popular culture (1961). More recently, Fred Inglis, whose account of children's literature approvingly embraces the comicstrips of his youth, makes an absolute distinction between these supposedly innocent representations of childhood and childish interests, and contemporary comics and horror movies, which he sees as loathsome and nasty (Inglis, 1981).

We know now that there is no rational justification for any of this. To represent the visual as meretricious and aesthetically debased, Thompson and Holbrook had to be very selective in their examples. If they had had to consider the marginal illustrations of mediaeval romance manuscripts, or the paintings of Blake, or Cruikshank's illustrations of Dickens, or Ted Hughes' collaborations with Leonard Baskin and Ralph Steadman, their objections to the visual and to its long cultural association with the word would have looked pretty empty. In fact, their objection only masqueraded as an argument against the visual - it was really an argument against the contemporary popular culture of their day. The popular culture of *yesterday*, of their own youth - Holbrook's folksongs, Inglis' Dandy and Beano, Williams' jazz music - could be comfortably accommodated in their attempt to widen the span of what could be valued as culture in schools and children's lives. But the culture of today was too much, and they failed to understand it, as Holbrook's savage repudiation of the turn to popular visual culture in the classrooms of the sixties vividly shows:

... the word is out of date. It is a visual age, so we must have strip cartoons, films, filmstrips, charts, visual aids. Language is superannuated. ...

Some teachers fall for the argument. ...

We must never give way: we are teachers of the responsiveness of the word. ... The new illiteracy of the cinema, television, comic strip, filmstrip and popular picture paper they accept as the dawn of a new era. (Holbrook, 1961/1967, 36-37)

We now embrace the popular, teach comics with enthusiasm, view films and TV drama as worthwhile objects of study, and have a view of text which extends beyond the word, combining image, language, graphic design, animation and even music in the range of electronic texts which are now increasingly part of our domain. Games, however, still worry us, maybe. Many schools still outlaw games in their computer suites; there are lurking suspicions that they offer shallow characters and narratives, immersive

experiences that somehow aren't as wholesome as the immersion of literature or film, and representations of violence and sexism that are endemic to the medium rather than incidental properties of many game texts as they happen to be at the moment.

Figure 1: Cloud Strife, from Final Fantasy VII

In this article, I want to challenge some of these assumptions, and look at games as if they might have something useful to offer English, some place in its inquiries about the processes of signification, and even in its textual canons. There are two arguments going the rounds at the moment about how computer games might be a legitimate part of the wider English curriculum. The first is that games are another medium in which a wider engagement with literacies of one kind or another can be developed. The second is that games are cultural objects worthy of study in their own right, like literature and film, and the study of them develops particular kinds of

critical and conceptual skill, and even aesthetic discrimination. Of course, this is the old separation of form and content that has always bedevilled conceptions of English; but I propose to stick with it for the first part of this article because the two arguments are different, up to a

point. I'll then move on and look at how games might relate to the teaching of drama, which raises rather different questions.

Game literacy, game grammar

The first argument is rooted in the notion of literacies beyond print. This is problematic, and contested by some, but it might be helpful to look at it in two ways, like print literacy - at whole text level and at 'sentence' level. At whole text and inter-textual levels, it's easy enough to see that games fall into genres much as films and literature do. Some of these overlap with these

older media, such as adventure games, or sci-fi games. Many genres, especially adventure games and roleplaying games, are strongly based in narrative, and so use similar structures of character, location, event, and narrative patterns of quest, conflict, resolution. These ideas, part of the stock-in-trade of English and media teaching, work perfectly well with games. This kind of expansion of the types of text used in the subject should provoke some interesting questions, and challenge some old assumptions. The question of genre, for instance, can be usefully problematised here. Is a genre classification based on formal qualities (epic or lyric in poetry, for instance; platformer or simulation in games); on narrative type (adventure film or game; sci-fi; romance); on the emotion it aims to provoke (horror novel, film, game); on the experience it offers its audience (roleplaying game)? There are no easy answers here, but it's fertile territory for innovative approaches to a topic which can often seem stuck in stereotypes or in simple lists, pigeonholing texts rather than analysing their properties.

On another tack, students could explore what kind of narrative makes a good game. This question has been asked in many different ways by games scholars. Marie-Laure Ryan points out that good game narratives need 'flat' characters, to use EM Forster's famous expression (2001). The reason for this is that games aren't good at representing complex psychological depth in characters - it isn't what they do (or it isn't what games do at the moment - this is a rapidly-developing medium). On the contrary, the complexity of a game narrative is in the patterning of the routes that can be followed, the challenges and rewards built into it, and the types of conflict that can be entered into. A kneejerk response to this might be to make an aesthetic judgment about games as impoverished, superficial, primitive. We should pause, however. Ryan points out that a classic game-like narrative is Alice in Wonderland, where the complexity is all external

and puzzle-based, rather than internally focused on psychological character development. Alice passes through and solves puzzles, and is no different at the end of the story. We don't complain about her superficiality, or compare her unfavourably to Hamlet or Paul Morel. We know that this is a different kind of story. Another scholar, Janet Murray, makes the same kind of point about computer-game characters, this time comparing them to Homeric heroes (1997). Again, Achilles doesn't work by psychological development, but by external conflict, magical powers and physical attributes. Walter Ong, writing about the heroes of oral narrative, describes them in ways that have many affinities with game characters (2002). He calls them 'heavy heroes' - they are agonistic, externalising problems in physical conflict, they are characterised by a few instantly recognisable attributes, they are formulaic, built out of elements that can be easily repeated and adapted, they are developed through episodic, aggregative narratives. I've explored these ideas elsewhere in relation to the hugely popular Japanese roleplaying game, *Final Fantasy VII* (Burn & Schott, 2004). The protagonist, Cloud Strife, is a blond cyberpunk mercenary, provocatively androgynous, with a wistful, beautiful face, an enormous sword and impressive military footwear (Fig 1).

We control him - he is our avatar in the game - and can invest him with extra weapons, magic powers, and armour; and also control his moves and choices in certain ways. When we consider that Achilles, a warrior of striking physical beauty as well as strength, is supplied with magic armour made by Hephaistos, and partly controlled by the gods of Olympus, the Homeric parallel becomes irresistible. It's also worth considering (and exploring with students) that the word *avatar* in its original sense is a Sanskrit-derived word for the descent of a god to earth.

To consider, then, why the protagonists of computer games, like those of other popular media,

resemble the heroes and heroines of myth, legend, fairytale, oral narrative and traditional ballads seems a worthwhile and valuable activity; and one which could also lead into discussion of why, by contrast, characters in traditions of Western drama, from Sophocles to Shakespeare, and characters in the realist European novel, are built psychologically. These different narrative forms can then be explored by students as legitimately alternative ways of representing human experience, rather than according to simplistic and misleading hierarchies of realism.

At whole text level, then, there are lots of edifying possibilities. At micro-level, quite specific aspects of

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textual grammar become apparent. Early in my teaching career, I remember watching boys reading the adventure game books of Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone - the *Fighting Fantasy* series. I was intrigued by the idea of these books as the only form of narrative I could think of that was written in the second person - an almost impossible idea. How could the reader be the protagonist of the narrative they are reading? This was a question about narrative, grammar and reader response all rolled into one. These game-books evolved into online MUDs (Multi-User Dungeons), where scenarios are similarly offered to the player in the second-person, as verbal text. Typically, these might say something like:

You are standing at a deserted

crossroads, under a leaden sky. To the north is a ruined cemetery, with broken gravestones looming through the mist. To the West is a ....

Do you go north, south, east or west?

This effectively names the reader/player as the central character in the story - the pronoun "you" is the name of this character, just as "I" is the name by which Jane Eyre is most often depicted, or "he" is the name by which Oliver Twist is most often represented.

Other features of the grammar of the game flow from this. The French narratologist, Gerard Genette, claimed that narratives are based on the category of verb, the basis of action (1980). He went on to propose that, if narratives are verbs writ large, then their natural mood is the indicative - they are, effectively, big statements offered to readers. If Genette is right about literary narrative, then something quite different is happening in the game. Clearly, some bits of this game are indicative - all the bits which set the scene. But when it comes to the crucial action that moves the story on, the mood changes to the interrogative. In fact, we can see this as a kind of imperative too - 'you must choose which road to take' (or, by implication, the game/narrative will never move on).

It seems, then, that narrative in games is a kind of narrative which oscillates between offering information and demanding action, triggering a cycle in which the player acts, which functions as a demand to the game (what next?), which replies with more information and demands, and so on. This cycle of offer and demand between player and game can be seen as a grammatical account of that much-abused word *interactivity*, I'd suggest.

This characteristic of games is a kind of turning outward of the narrative text to face the reader to directly involve him or her. This occasionally happens in literature or drama, though the final move, to require an action from the audience on which the progress of the text depends, is not possible. So at the

end of *The Tempest*, Prospero renounces his magic, prepares to set sail for Milan, and turns to the audience to beg their assistance by filling his sails with wind. The narrative is left unresolved - without our help, he will not succeed, but as the play stops there, and as our help can only be rhetorically demanded, we never discover what happens. This anticipation of interactivity leaves us right at the threshold dividing stage and auditorium - the point at which games pick up the story.

Another example familiar to all English teachers is Wilfred Owen's *Dulce et Decorum Est*. While the first part of the poem is in the first person indicative, setting the scene and describing the gas attack in conventional narrative style, the last section is in the second person, addressing the reader in the role of the male adult back in England. Through the "If" clause, we are offered alternatives - to stay at home and misrepresent the war, or to share Owen's experience and tell the truth:

If you too could pace behind the wagon that we flung him in .../ My Friend, you would not tell with such high zest/ To children ardent for some desperate glory/ The Old Lie,

Dulce et Decorum Est Pro Patria Mori.

I'm not suggesting here that this poem or The Tempest are kinds of proto-computer game (though the latter comes pretty close, maybe; and, in fact, a game version of the play is currently being developed by the RSC with media academic Henry Jenkins from MIT). Rather, the point is that the grammar of games and game narratives revolves around a naming of the reader/player as a character in the game, and the text's demand for the player's action; and, to an extent, this is what Shakespeare and Owen are doing too, though the reader cannot act to change the text. They turn outwards, allocate the reader some function, and demand that they respond. And this, again, is reflected in the grammatical structures of the texts. If we're going to work on grammar with students, then kinds of grammar which work across different semiotic modes might be of interest to them, might increase their chances of getting the hang of difficult abstract ideas, might locate an exploration of grammar in different forms, some of them strange and new, others deeply embedded in contemporary popular culture.

Games as cultural objects

The second argument is to regard games as an important new form of narrative fiction. Like other narrative media in the popular cultural domain, such as films, TV dramas and comicstrips, there is an argument that these form an important part of the cultural landscape of many young people, and deserve to be included in our curriculum. There is no logical reason to exclude them if we include film. Perhaps this argument is hardest to resist when we consider the partial convergence of these media. Many games are adaptations of films - *Star Wars, The Thing, The Hulk, The Matrix*, and so on. While some of these result in texts which may be a long way from their parent original, and not necessarily very good games, others are creative homages to the original in many respects, *The Thing* being the best example here - an action adventure game based on John Carpenter's cult horror movie. Yet other adaptations may be closer to familiar English territory. Perhaps the most far-reaching cross-media relationship is to be found in *The Lord of the Rings*. This was the inspiration for the table-top game of Dungeons and Dragons, in which Tolkien's narrative is transformed into a set of challenges, economies and puzzles controlled by a rule-book, dice, and a Dungeon-master who arbitrates. This complex tradition of gaming became transformed into the online text-based MUDs referred to above; which in turn were succeeded by graphic-based computer games using key principles of the Dungeons and Dragons system. In effect, the system of Dungeon-master, dice and rulebook become the programmed game engine which drives and controls the game's mix of chance and skill.

It may seem that this is a long way from literature - but students might profitably spend time on what exactly it is about Tolkien's text which made it such fertile ground for this kind of game. For one thing, it provided a self-contained fantasy world and a palette of fantasy

Figure 2: Lottie, a player-named avatar from Baldur's Gate

character-types to go with it, which is perfect for the kind of exploratory, quest-based narrative that works well in a game (and if anyone feels sniffy about Tolkien, just substitute the *Morte d'Arthur, Gawaine and the Green Knight, Spenser's Faerie Queene, the Ancient Mariner*, and so on). For another, it is not hard to see how the events and characters in the book are often organised around economies that translate well into game-systems like health and life points, which can be easily programmed. Frodo and the Company of the Ring lose energy on a snowy mountain and falter; they eat some elvish lembas-cake and their health is restored; magic armour (elvish chain-mail) boosts Frodo's defensive capacity; Gandalf absorbs Saruman's power when he overcomes him, and so on.

Games such as *Planescape Torment* and *Baldur's Gate* are direct descendants of the Dungeons and Dragons system, and use the same structures, economies and character types, with important variations in the narratives and landscapes. More broadly, this has developed into the genre of role-playing games, which can be defined by the capacity of the avatar to develop and grow, acquiring new powers, new capabilities, new items of value, and so on. Fig. 2 shows an avatar, named and constructed by a player as Lottie, a Half-Elf, with the powers of a Thief and a particular mix of the available characteristics of strength, wisdom, dexterity, charisma, intelligence and constitution - a mix determined by the player at the outset of the game.

The Lord of the Rings has also been adapted, of course, as Peter Jackson's epic trilogy; and, in a curious twist, the films have then been adapted into games again, not the classic 'roleplaying' games which the books gave rise to, but more popular action adventure games.

This complex history of texts and media is begging to become a classroom research project, which could ask all kinds of questions about the nature of textuality which nobody really knows the answer to yet: what kinds of narrative do these different texts construct? What can they or can't they do in the different media of print, film and game? What kinds of worlds do they create? How do they address their readers or players (and what's the difference between readers and players?) How is a quest in a game different from a quest in a book or film? How are these texts produced, marketed, consumed? How are they differently valued by the societies in which they are made and used?

I have been working recently with a colleague, James Durran at Parkside Community College, Cambridge, on ways to use games in English. He has devised a project for Year 8 built around the computer game of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*.

The activities he has developed include analysing the box of the computer game, looking at how it demands roleplay through linguistic imperatives (*BE Harry Potter!*), and makes a variety of promises through word and image. The course also includes sorting screenshots from games to think about and devise genre categories. It involves studying the media institutions involved in game production, from makers of sound technologies and game developers to publishers and reviewers. It involves playing the game as a whole class experience thorough an interactive whiteboard, exploring the player's experience and imaginative engagement. It involves comparing the game of Harry Potter with the book and the film, thinking closely about how the different media tell the story in different ways, how films and games both use the moving image but structure time differently, for instance. It involves the early stages of designing their own game, a process which leads some children to draw on their own experience of game-narratives, and others to think how stories they know from literature can be adapted to make a game.

This question of game design leads into a research project we are currently undertaking at the Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media. This involves the

development of a software prototype of a games authoring tool, which will allow students to make their own games. The software is being developed by Immersive Education, known to many English teachers for their Kar2ouche title and its application to Shakespeare in particular. So readers of this article interested in the logical step of children making their own games, as they can currently make their own videos, websites or multimedia texts, might watch out for news of this project as it develops. However, anoyne who wants to try game-making might also try one of several packages which are already commercially available, such as *Stagecast Creator*, which will allow quite complex puzzle games to be made, so that students can consider through practice how the rule-governed system of a puzzle-maze operates, and what kinds of narrative it can accommodate. An easier package, which will allow students to make simple (but impressive and satisfying!) games in half an hour or so, is *3D game-maker*. The games are formulaic, but it is a good way to explore genres, iconographies, and basic game components such as avatars, player and non-player characters, bosses, levels, obstacles, combat structures, and economies of health, power, life and energy.

To return, finally, to James' Harry Potter project, or to the suggestions above about Shakespeare, Owen and Tolkien, perhaps what I am suggesting is not so much how we might gratuitously shoehorn games into our literature teaching programmes, as how games might provoke some profound rethinking about how to teach literature. To see language as an available alternative

mode of representation alongside film and game, rather than as mysteriously superior, the Senior Service of the representational technologies, the sacrosanct repository of the fictional narratives which much of our work consists of, is for most of us to make a considerable shift of perspective, a deep reconsideration of how we understand representation, signification, and cultural value. More specifically, this suggests a quite different approach to teaching literature. Our attention to the semiotic detail of the text would become closer and more multi-layered; our attitude to the aesthetic properties of texts would become more generous, complex and rational; the cultural experiences of our pupils would stand a better chance of connecting with the textual experiences we offer in the classroom.

Games and drama

I have spent the last two years researching roleplaying games, with colleagues Diane Carr, Gareth Schott and David Buckingham. One question which preoccupied us for some time was the question of what kind of drama is implied in "roleplaying"? At times, in games, I have been reminded of the drama classroom. For instance, in the online roleplaying game *Anarchy Online*, I (in the form of my avatar, Nirvano) was standing in the sci-fi city of Borealis with a group of other players, planning a mission (Fig. 3). It was, to be honest, a bit low-level - we spent most of the time talking about what to call our team, and deciding who was the leader. But this group of people, dressed in fantastic sci-fi costumes, playing the roles of sci-fi warriors, with an assortment of weapons, and various possible trajectories of mission and monster to confront, was not a million miles from a classroom project I used to do on *Beowulf*. Again, my Year 8 class were fantasy warriors, with a hierarchy of leadership, faced with a monster and a mission, and the task of improvising their way into it.

The other aspect of educational drama this game reminded me of was the drama convention of forum theatre, developed along with the by-now familiar range of conventions for structuring group-devised drama, and exploring alternatives, meanings, motivations, points-of-view. These approaches, developed by specialists like Jonothan Neelands and Paul Bunyan during my years as a drama teacher, derive in many instances from the radical community theatre of Augusto Boal. His use of forum theatre, in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1979), is a way of reversing the conventional relationship between playwright/actor and audience, so that a dispossessed community can acquire the (albeit symbolic) power of determining what happens next in the play.

The wider political implications of Boal's work may not directly translate to our situations - it may be impertinent to assume that work in drama or games is directly liberatory - though they have been invoked in certain instances of games design. A good example is Katharine Neill, an investigative journalist and independent game-designer in Melbourne, who has employed the principle of Boal's radical theatre in her use of the open source HalfLife game engine, making a game called *Escape from Woomera*, in which players take the roles of detainees in an Australian immigration detention centre. However, while this kind of seriously emancipatory project may be a long way from our use of games in English, games with elements of roleplay do arguably offer some control over events, themes, even worlds, in ways at least analogous to the processes of devising and making in educational drama.

What difference might any of this make to drama in any of our classrooms, however? This is largely unknown territory, though I guess there are drama teachers out there beginning to consider how games as a dramatic form might become part of their work. I would also recommend a thought-provoking piece by John Carroll, which looks at games in the context of the educational drama pioneered by
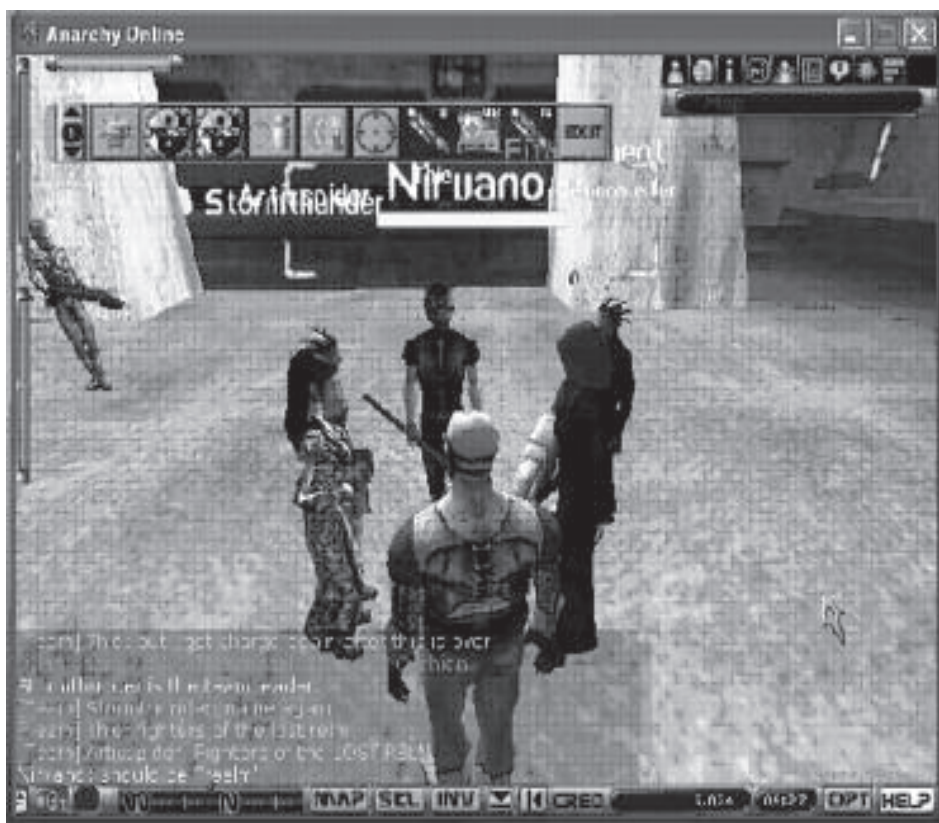

Figure 3: Nirvano, my avatar in the online roleplaying game, Anarchy Online

Dorothy Heathcoate and Gavin Bolton (Carroll, 2002). One of Carroll's productive lines of thought is to explore how the ideas of play familiar in the emerging field of games studies might apply to drama, which, much more than English, has a complex relation with play, which by no coincidence is the English word for what the French call a piece of theatre; and which centrally involves playing at other identities, or roleplay.

So I'm speculating - but I'd throw three proposals into the pot.

First, we might pause to consider how computer games are, for many of the children we teach, a powerful dramatic experience. They can inhabit a huge range of characters from gangsters to wizards, from manga eco-warriors to mediaeval knights, from Harry Potter to Legolas the elf. We may not know much about this; but we should explore it a bit. How do they feel about the intensely immersive worlds these characters move in, and the often complex narratives they navigate? How do they experience the participatory theatre available to them, the ability to shoot Nazis in *Return to Castle Wolfenstein*, fly round Hogwarts on a broomstick chasing Draco Malfoy, confront the alien horror of *The Thing*, deploy the archaeological talents of Lara Croft? They may, like many players, belong to vast networks of fan communities, writing elaborate backstories, or creating fan art for game websites.

Second, why not think about how drama projects might be based on some of these game structures and narratives? It's true that *Tomb Raider* made a particularly vacuous film, but it needn't have done. In a sense, Lara Croft is a spectacular icon with a hole in the middle, into which any kind of preoccupations can be poured, as with any good folk hero. We can explore the role of women in male-dominated professions, the ethics of appropriating the relics of past civilisations, the tortured hierarchies of the English class system, or the right of girls to solve problems through violent combat.

Third, we might exploit the characteristics of god-games like *The*

Sims. Simulations are is some ways closer to drama than other games - a game where you create a world, a family, a relationship, and guide them through the mundane events of daily life is worth exploring. These games, though they are often represented as blandly positive, as interactive dolls' houses for girls who don't like shoot-em-ups, can explore more difficult themes. They can build gay relationships as well as straight, kill characters off as well as give them life, dismantle a family as well as pull it together.

Final thoughts

I've deliberately avoided the media area of the curriculum, because it's too easy to hive off films, television, music video, the internet and computer games into that bit of the curriculum, and leave English as a sacrosanct place of literature and print, all its old assumptions about the value, formal qualities and pedagogies of a literature-based curriculum intact. However, to think about games as part of the media curriculum requires some rethinking of comfortable old categories here, too. In many ways, the media institutions, texts and audiences relating to games behave like the ones we are used to in the context of films, television and other media. But there are also important differences. The institutional history is different - games began with obsessively original lone individuals, not with big studios. The texts behave differently, as I hope I have shown in this article. And the audiences are not just audiences, but players - a very different beast.

So, to include something about games in the muddy mix of English, Drama and Media is not just to add another kind of text, another form of media. It is to challenge our thinking about textuality, about literacy, about grammar, about engagement and response, about aesthetic merit and cultural taste. Just about everything in our remit, in fact. But that seems to me to be a healthy acknowledgement that whatever seems settled and known must be balanced against those things we're

still struggling to understand; and this is all the more exciting if students can join us in the exploration, rather than waiting till we're sure of the answers.

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