



## Ludic Language Pedagogy

#6 (2024)

<https://www.llpjournal.org>

# Designing Game-Centred Curricula: A Critical Inquiry

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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received: 2023/09/22

Revised: 2024/01/29

Accepted: 2024/01/30

Published: 2024/02/01

#### Keywords:

Digital games

Curriculum Inquiry

Pedagogy

Schooling

L1 English

Literacies

#### Peer reviewers:

Anton Vogel

James York

### KEY POINTS

**Background:** Digital games as technologies for teaching and learning are finding their way into schools with increasing frequency, raising questions about how teachers plan for their use.

**Aim:** This paper utilises curriculum inquiry to explore the experiences of teachers designing curricula that centre digital games for play and study.

**Methods:** We employ a memory work methodology to analyse four English teachers' reflections, emphasizing the value of reflecting on everyday actions to understand the complexity of professional lives and the situated nature of knowledge.

**Results:** Our paper reveals that designing and implementing digital game-centred curricula is complex. The analysis of themes related to engaging with students' lifeworlds, planning for skills and knowledge, the challenges of play, and issues of access and equity, suggest use of technology for school learning is always inseparable from other phenomena, such as teaching methods, purposes, values and contexts.

**Conclusion:** Those engaged in the design of game-centred curricula are in a constant state of negotiation which neither starts nor ends with the production of material artefacts.

### TWEET SYNOPSIS

Designing digital game-centred curricula is complex work. We explore four teachers' experiences to examine the tensions that arise when digital games and school learning are brought together.

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## Introduction to the series

This is the second paper in a three-part series which examines digital game literacies and school learning. Part 1 in the series<sup>1</sup> explored the concept of digital game literacies from a sociocultural perspective and explained why such an approach is important for educators seeking to work with digital games (Bacalja, 2023). Part 2 explores the challenge of designing a digital game curriculum. Drawing on accounts from four experienced teachers, it engages a curriculum inquiry approach to examine the tensions that arise when digital games and school learning are brought together. The final part introduces a case study of a school that replaced traditional print-based texts with a digital game, highlighting how the emergence of operational, cultural, and critical dimensions of literacies in such contexts are intertwined with the dispositions of teachers.

## Introduction

In his work on popular culture and critical media pedagogies, Ernest Morrell (2004a, 2004b) argues that there is a moral imperative to bring texts that are enjoyed by young people from their out-of-school lives into the classroom. Morrell highlights the relevance of popular culture to adolescents and the ways popular culture can be used to make connections to academic texts and concepts to make the case for bringing popular media into classrooms for both pleasure and critical engagement. These arguments have come to underpin a growing movement in English teaching that looks beyond canonical texts, largely print-centre literature such as novels and poetry, and which draw attention to questions of legitimate knowledge; namely: what should be taught and how should it be taught (Riddle & Apple, 2019)?

Central to these arguments has been the notion that English teachers need to expand the field of text selection to include more popular culture (see Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Giroux & Simon, 1989) and digital media in particular (see Beavis, 1999; Sefton-Green & Nixon, 2003). While print-centric approaches to selecting texts for high school English teaching remain remarkably resistant to change (see Bacalja, 2021; Jogie, 2015), recent decades have seen a growing body of educators centring digital games at school as objects of and for study. This movement rejects the notion that young people's out-of-school social and cultural pursuits are not worthy of attention, and instead builds on arguments emanating from New Literacies (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003) and third spaces movements (Gutiérrez, 2008; Potter & McDougall, 2017) to support the case for the digital game English classroom. Those engaged in this work are deeply interested in questions about the current and future learning needs of young people. These educators are constantly navigating tensions between the roles and purposes of L1, or mother-tongue, education, and literacy learning, where competing interests of L1 and literacy education play out in curricular design experiences (see Erixon & Green, 2020, for a more thorough examination).

Perhaps we should not be surprised that a popular culture text as ubiquitous as the digital game should draw the attention of school educators. As any teacher can attest, maximising student engagement and motivation in an age of digital devices is an extraordinary challenge. Digital gameplay is fun, and social, and allows for world-building opportunities hitherto unimaginable. We might go so far as to argue that there is a moral imperative to bring these technologies into schools – for both the engagement they encourage and the learning potential so often ascribed to them (see Gee, 2007; Prensky, 2003; Squire, 2011). However, as others have discovered (see Sims, 2017; Tyack & Cuban, 1997), placing digital technologies at the centre of schooling and expecting radical and productive change is not realistic and ignores the complex relational work that occurs at sites of teaching and learning. One way to explore this complexity is through a focus on curriculum inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> Available here: <https://ilpjournal.org/2023/02/22/a-bacalja-digital-game-literacies-01.html>

Whereas part one in this series (see Bacalja, 2023) made the case for a sociocultural orientation to digital game literacies for schooling and encouraged educators to resist the temptation to conceptualise digital games as unproblematic solutions to all of the challenges of schooling, this paper focuses on curriculum inquiry as a tool for exploring processes and perspectives of curriculum design. We begin by first exploring the literature on digital games and schooling, highlighting the privileging of perspectives on teaching and learning, and reviewing the existing work on curriculum design. We then share four teachers' experiences of designing English curricula that centre digital games, utilising a memory work methodology to highlight how reflecting on the personal narratives that teachers produce about their teaching histories allows us to draw attention to the processes and structures that mediate curriculum design. From these stories, we identify four themes for discussion, and conclude by asking what these themes mean for others interested in pushing the boundaries of digital game-centred schooling.

## Game-centred teaching and learning

The popularity of digital gameplay outside of schools (for evidence of popular usage see Entertainment Software Association, 2022) has been met with equal enthusiasm from educators incorporating these digital technologies into a range of educational institutions. Not surprisingly, academic research into the phenomenon of digital games as technologies for school learning has followed this eagerness.

The dominant approach to researching the phenomena of digital games in schools has been a focus on learning. The research focussed on the 'learning' component of digital game-centred classrooms tends to prioritise the outcomes of teaching, or the effects of using digital games in classrooms, (for example, see Boyle et al., 2012; Boyle et al., 2016; Kirginas, 2023; Perrotta et al., 2013). Outcomes are conceived broadly in this body of work, with references to fun, self-reliance, autonomy, experience, cognition, and assessment performance. Individual case studies exploring outcomes have provided a useful basis for exploring the possible effects of game-based learning. Burn's (2021) exploration of designing games in L1 English contexts extensively analyses the outcomes of such design, the games created by students. Analysis of student 'outputs' from digital game interventions is common in the literature (see Bacalja, 2018a; Beavis, 2007; Gerber, Abrams, Onwuegbuzie, & Benge, 2014; Toomey & Kitson, 2017). As deHaan (2019) highlights with specific reference to language learning, studies in this space tend to focus on game-based language learning, rather than game-based language teaching.

The emphasis on 'learning' in the research should not be surprising given the introduction of digital games in schools is taking place in what Biesta describes as 'an age of learning' (2005, p. 54), where a language of learning has become the dominant discourse, leading to questions that focus on the "efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process" (p. 59). In the context of digital game-based learning (DGBL), this has led to an over-emphasis on the 'learning' component of DGBL, where measuring, both qualitatively and quantitatively (but far more of the latter), is privileged. This has produced arguments that minimise the effect of social, cultural, and pedagogical factors that construct the contexts of such learning, and support for teaching in such sites that advocate for teachers as 'guides on the side.' Such views ignore the kinds of entanglements that Fawns (2022) argues make technology in education inseparable from other phenomena, such as teaching methods, purposes, values, and contexts. In other words, in the same way that we should not expect students to learn more simply because the content is delivered through digital technologies, we cannot just sit students in front of games and expect that school-specific learning will happen.

Interest in the pedagogy of utilizing games for learning purposes has focussed on different pedagogical orientations, including instructional (Ke, 2009), constructivist (Kafai & Burke, 2016), design (Burn, 2021), and critical (Bacalja, 2018a), as well as attempts to utilise digital games to re-constitute the school experience (Sims, 2017). We can see evidence of the pedagogical emphasis in case studies that reflect on how games are used to support learning in school contexts. For example, Al-Khanfar (2023) describes a study where the popular *Legends of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* (Nintendo EAD, 1998) game was used to support the teaching of Spanish. The author focussed on instructional methods, (such as play, collaboration, ungraded practice, and gamification of memorization) to determine the efficacy of using games for language learning. Spano's (2021) study of game-based language learning in a junior high school EFL class reflects on the use of the card game *Two Rooms*

and a Boom (Gerding & McCoy, 2013). In this case, Spano details teaching methods associated with principles of Task-Based Language Teaching to determine how such an approach supports curriculum goals. In my own work exploring how digital games can be utilised in a middle-years English classroom (see Bacalja, 2018a, 2018b), the emphasis is on detailing and assessing the appropriateness of a range of teaching strategies (and their discursive foundations). This research focus on pedagogical considerations (for more examples see: Arnseth et al., 2018; Hanghøj, 2013; Spano et al., 2021) has been important for developing practical understandings that bridge the gap between out-of-school game-based learning and in-school potentialities.

Less attention has been paid to what comes before teaching and learning, that is, the processes through which teachers develop digital game-centred curricula. These processes include both curriculum design and the social and administrative work of creating space for such learning in schools that have been reluctant to position popular culture texts as legitimate (Bacalja, 2021). Narratives of the work teachers complete as they attempt to establish game-centred learning in school spaces are especially important to share with educational practitioners and researchers, as the thinking and negotiation conducted before a course of teaching begins can be opaque. Teachers who wish to experiment with digital games in their classroom, even if they can access the extant body of research, will find scant information about the processes of curriculum design that inform such teaching.

Some important work has already begun addressing this imperative. For example, deHaan (2020) begins his analysis of the transformative potential of teaching language and literacy with games by first recounting the motivations of such curriculum work, highlighting how “making and seeing a difference” (p. 163) underpinned design. Poole’s (2021) account of designing a non-digital version of the game *Risk* (Lamorisse & Levin, 1959) to support teaching English as a foreign language in China extensively details design decisions that account for contextual factors (such as the number of students, time, sociality) and learning objectives. McFadyen’s (2020a, 2020b) reflections on bringing games into his school and classroom demonstrates the multiple factors associated with designing curriculum, including consideration of student interests, local constraints, government curriculum requirements, and teaching activities. What these and other examples of educators reflecting on the design of game curricula demonstrate is that the learning students experience through the play and study of games in schools is directly related to the kinds of curriculum design that precedes teaching.

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There has been little research conducted that focuses on curriculum design in relation to digital games in L1 English classrooms. This dearth of empirical work is perhaps not surprising, given that there has also been only a small amount of empirical research on digital games in L1 English classrooms (Bacalja, 2022; Nash & Brady, 2022), the majority of which has privileged pedagogical approaches and literacy outcomes, with little attention dedicated to understanding the processes and conversations that inform curriculum design. Teachers have, for example, employed digital games in relation to multimodal textual analysis (Stufft & von Gillern, 2021), learning related to game design (Apperley & Beavis, 2011), multimodal textual production (Marlatt, 2018), and gaming literacies (Beavis et al., 2015). It is the lack of attention to the processes of designing game-centred curriculum that we wish to address in this paper.

## The case for curriculum inquiry

Before articulating the importance of curriculum inquiry, we want to clarify our use of the term game-centred curriculum. Throughout this paper, we refer to the design of game-centred curriculum. This term captures the ways that curriculum which centres digital games is conceived, designed and enacted. The ‘game-centred’ part of the term refers to the centring of digital games as objects for study. Here, we differentiate from other approaches that see digital games as technologies for

learning through (for example, Duolingo). Put another way, we are interested in school contexts that focus on learning with, in and around *games*, rather than solely *through* games. The 'curriculum' part of this term signals a shift away from exclusively exploring teaching and learning.

While the tendency for research in this space to focus on teaching and learning (outcomes) associated with digital game classrooms is understandable given the immediate practicality associated with implementation, there is much that educators can learn from employing a curriculum inquiry lens. Curriculum inquiry conceived as the study of documents that supposedly capture 'plans' or 'structures' for teaching fails to capture the dynamism associated with curriculum-teaching relationships. When conceptualised in terms of curriculum as "the interdisciplinary study of educational experiences" (Pinar, 2004, p. 2), and the structuring of teaching-learning experiences (Green, 2018, p. 7), we can see how an inquiry into the design and implementation of game-centred classrooms can help us understand complex relations between contexts, people, dispositions, knowledge, and processes.

Curriculum is not fixed, static, independent, or apolitical. Rather, everyday teachers thread their subjectivities through subject matter (Pinar, 2012), and teachers engaged in the process of using digital games in classrooms are always bringing their 'selves' into their curriculum design (Blume, 2020). Curriculum inquiry is, therefore, always personal and political. Furthermore, we recognise that distinctions between curriculum inquiry, teaching and learning are blurred and often difficult to untangle. Reflecting on such entanglements reveals these blurred boundaries. It might be convenient to argue that curriculum design always takes place before teaching begins, but the realities of teaching and learning are more complex, as Fawns (2022) demonstrates in his theorising of entangled pedagogy and the importance of avoiding technology first or pedagogy first approaches.

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## Memory work

To support our curriculum inquiry, we engage in memory work. Memory work, developed by Haug and others (Haug et al., 1999), is an inquiry approach that can support the kinds of curriculum inquiry evoked above. It suggests that our stories do not define us, but rather demonstrate how we construct ourselves in the world. By analyzing the stories we tell, memory work reveals the processes through which we conform to existing structures and how we produce and reproduce ourselves within societal categories. This includes examining our entanglement in the ideological relations of schooling and the conflicts that arise between our adherence to conventional approaches to teaching and learning, and those that push at the boundaries.

## Reflections

The five authors of this paper have come to know each other through our shared interest in bringing digital games into L1 English classrooms. All five of us have been classroom teachers of L1 English. Ben, Mark and Josh currently work in Australian high schools teaching English while Brady and Alex have previously taught this subject before moving into initial teacher education and research roles in Education Faculties in American and Australian universities respectively.

Over recent years, the five of us have engaged in various degrees of discussion and collaboration focussed on our design and implementation of a digital game-centred curriculum. The decision to capture more formally the substance of some of those reflections was motivated by a desire to both better understand our own practices of designing curriculum, and also to support others who might wish to follow a similar path.

Readers will notice a certain pattern in the reflections that follow. This is because they were all scaffolded by the same three prompts. Namely:

- What informed your decision to design a digital games curriculum for the English classroom?
- What factors impacted your design decisions?

- What do teachers thinking about designing their own digital game-centred curriculum for English need to consider?

While each was encouraged to use these prompts as a guide, as you will see, divergences occurred and these were certainly not discouraged.

### Reflection 1: Ben

I teach in a regional Catholic co-educational secondary school located approximately 4 hours West of Melbourne. We have a student cohort of approximately 500 students. Being in a regional area, where regional refers to a small town, city or area outside a major capital city, our students tend to be more focused on farm life. There's a real sense that students will complete their secondary schooling and then move on to working on mum and dad's farm. This can lead to some disengagement and a 'what's the point?' attitude when students approach classroom learning disconnected from their perceived futures.

Coming out of two years of lockdowns due to the pandemic, we were confronted with an extra layer of disengagement. Students just didn't have the same interest or intent as their pre-lockdown selves. Their only real form of connection was social media, Zoom, FaceTime, and digital games. As we considered how we might respond to increased levels of disengagement, we were intrigued by the constant student remarks about the ways they used digital games as a way to connect with their friends, both locally and abroad.

Taking this on board, and with a new principal who was keen to innovate and include as many digital technology offerings as possible, I decided to investigate the possibility of including digital games in our English curriculum. After all, aren't digital games just stories brought to life? Aren't they someone's construction, someone's character that must go on a journey to solve something, and eventually realise something? I wanted to explore how we could capitalise on these questions in our classrooms, and hopefully teach some skills that we could apply to our more traditional English subject. Engagement and re-engagement with school were on my mind, as well as questions like, "What would be the point of a digital game unit?" "What would we want to achieve?" "What would we want students to achieve?"

The works of Jane Austen provided some answers. We teach Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice* (2001) in Year 12 (ages 17-18) at our school and I was reminded of students referring to the protagonist, Elizabeth Bennet, as a real person during class time. Students referred to the novel's characters, both in their discussions and their writing, as people who lived. They seemed unaware that the novel we were studying was Austen's construction. I observed similar discussions and responses in other classes. These interactions provided me with my first answer. I wanted our students to realise that authors construct characters, and thus novels, and the worlds of their novels. Digital games, being clearly a construction, seemed the ideal avenue for approaching this concept.

Having decided what I wanted out of this unit; the next hurdle was to determine which game would be appropriate. I came across some teaching examples from another school that had worked with *Never Alone (Upper One Games, 2014)*, a platform game which tells a creation story from the Inupiat people in Alaska. There were some differences between the traditional tale and this digital game. Namely, the main character was male in the traditional tale and female in the digital game. This provided a further opportunity to delve into texts as constructions and to focus on authorial choices. On top of this, the game is available on a wide range of platforms, making it accessible to most of our students.

Ensuring access to the game became a hurdle to overcome. We would not be able to place the game on a booklist, as we normally would, and have students purchase it. What if they couldn't purchase it? What if their families didn't have access to the technology to play it? How would we, as a school, support our lower socio-economic students, as we would with traditional materials for the English classroom? Being in a regional area, access to a stable internet connection was also a concern.

We're a 'Bring Your Own' device school. Every student is allowed to utilise their own digital devices for school learning. This worked well for our choice of game but also presented new challenges. We had to ensure we could manage the game and the gameplay. We didn't want students completing the game in their free time and then coming to school with nothing to do during our discussions –

essentially the opposite of what we want from traditional English teaching. I approached the school leadership team and presented my case for a class set of iPads; making the argument that such devices could be deployed across all subject domains, considering the vast 'app' offering available on the App Store. It also allowed the school the opportunity to control the technology and to ensure every student had access to the game.

We focussed our teaching on the construction of story – the characters, narrative, views, and values; curriculum content typically studied in English. As we progressed through our curriculum, students became interested in the Inupiat people, the Alaskan tribe at the centre of the game's story. They were keen to learn about these people and their culture. It was this student 'buy-in' that allowed us to extend our scope beyond the game itself and into First Nations peoples and the importance of oral history. We were able to include a focus on Australia's First Nations Peoples and the importance of storytelling to their culture through the exploration of Dreamtime and Creation stories. Our unit was designed to support students towards a summative assessment task that asked them to explain how traditional stories can be communicated through 21st-century modes.

The discussions and the learning that transpired around storytelling and its importance to all cultures were valuable and worthwhile. Students were able to realise that digital games were constructed, and ultimately the result of certain choices on the part of game designers. But beyond that, students walked away with a new appreciation for the importance of storytelling. Our unit, therefore, became titled '21<sup>st</sup> Century Storytelling.'

Reflecting on feedback from teachers and students leaves me optimistic about this unit. Teachers reported that they found digital games allowed for a vast range of possibilities for teaching: the literacies the world demands of us and our students, and an understanding of the construction of the game, the music, the graphics, the mechanics, and even coding. A realm of possibilities. Student reflections on the unit surprised us, especially their interest in how the game was played during class time. Time for gameplay was loosely structured, with two or three lessons dedicated to free play, and the next sequence of lessons focussed on the analysis of the game story. A common thread in the feedback was that students wanted more structure. One option we are considering is dedicating 20 to 30 minutes to gameplay in each class, followed by discussions and activities.

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Ultimately, we have resolved to continue to use digital games in our English classroom. We have taken student and teacher feedback on board and amended, and hopefully improved, the unit. We threw a lot at this study in a 'see what works' fashion. Some of it did, and we're keeping it and honing it. Some of it didn't, and we'll pop that in the 'maybe' pile. We achieved what we had hoped, but throughout it, teachers took ownership and developed ideas and lessons. It'll be interesting to see how we develop this unit over the next year, putting into action what we learned. There's scope here for a larger, more in-depth unit on gameplay mechanics and digital game development; something beyond the English classroom.

## Reflection 2: Mark

When I started looking into digital games as a literary text in the class, the school I was working in was a government College in Canberra, the capital city of Australia. The senior secondary curriculum in this jurisdiction is less prescriptive and more student-orientated than most other jurisdictions in Australia, giving teachers greater agency in course and content selection to meet student needs. When applied to the English curriculum, this means that skills and abilities are prescribed, but the method of their teaching is not. At the level of individual classrooms, teachers are trusted to select all texts for use

with students, guided by their faculty and senior leadership, and with consideration for school culture and expectations.

My school has approximately 1200 students in years 11 and 12 (ages 16-18) each year, with English as the only compulsory subject. Students intending to go on to further study at university must undertake English. The teacher of each class selects a thematic approach to meet curriculum outcomes, based on student and teacher needs and interests. I had 'played' with the use of digital games to meet these outcomes long before I made them the central text of study. For example, in teaching a semester-long unit on horror, with a focus on how different media utilised different conventions to engage and manipulate audiences, and in different eras, I worked with students to contrast the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Ira Levin's *Rosemary's Baby* (1967) against Ridley Scott's film *Alien* (1979). I wanted to experiment with the use of the game *The Walking Dead* (Telltale Games, 2012) on school iPads to have students look for the ways player agency influences the engagement of the audience. My head of faculty and school leadership were very supportive, particularly as the cost outlay was zero due to the "first chapter" of the game being free for download at the time. The school would later lose access to the iPad fleet, with Chromebooks supplied to all students by the government, and students permitted to bring their own preferred devices.

When this proved successful, and my presentations at a local educational conference showed there was interest from other educators, it became clear that both students and teachers were enthusiastic about using games as a text, so I set about planning a full semester unit of teaching games as literary works.

In 2014 there were precious few resources for designing such a course, and what was I trying to do, anyway? My students were well-versed in visual literacy, as that is a key component of the English curriculum, and they had experience studying graphic novels such as *Batman: Year One*, *Maus*, *Watchmen* and *When The Wind Blows*, so I planned to design a unit around the essential question 'Can digital games be considered literature?' and to use digital games to meet the outcomes of this unit.

In 2016, I designed and implemented a unit entitled 'Perspectives in Gaming' to meet the requirements of the new Australian Curriculum English course. My goal was to create a semester-long unit studying digital games as vehicles for critical thinking and literacy, in much the same way that novels and films are used but with the added benefit of differing levels of immersion. I used the following pitch to gain the support of my school leadership team:

Perspectives in Gaming - digital games are an inherently interactive narrative experience. Through digital games, players are encouraged to examine dilemmas, concepts, cultures, historical events and more through their own perspectives, and through the perspectives of the developers. The nature of games means that often, a combination of these perspectives is experienced by the player. This unit examines the ways in which narrative games use content, structure and voice to shape the experience and opinions of the player, ensuring that players have the knowledge required to not be passive consumers throughout the experience.

It took most of the year to identify how best to meet curriculum goals, select and source appropriate digital games, and design effective and valid assessments consistent with tasks undertaken by the rest of the Year Twelve cohort.

In developing this course, many significant hurdles needed to be overcome:

- Ensuring equity of access
  - All students must be able to access every text
- Text Selection
  - We are legally required to provide texts to students, like schoolbooks, and cannot expect students to purchase games for themselves
  - We must ensure that games function on whatever platform students can access
  - We cannot afford to buy games costing USD\$50 each between 24 and 48 students each year - this would exceed the faculty's yearly budget!
  - Games must be useful for investigating one or more specific functions
  - Games must be rated MA15+ or lower (our students are 16-18 years of age)



After surveying all of our students, we found each student would be using either a MacBook or a Windows-operated laptop, or could access these at home. Most students had a *Steam* account or were willing and able to create one (with family support and approval). As a result, we used *Steam* to distribute games and were able to provide individual *Steam* codes for each student to redeem in their personal account. This would not be viable in the long term but would work with the support of developers in the short term.

The teaching unit was planned for a full semester (16 teaching weeks, with four hours face-to-face per week), with students studying five different games in order to view a breadth of styles and storytelling techniques. I used Luke & Freebody's (1999) Four Resources Model, whereby students took on the four roles of the reader: code breaker, text user, text participant, and text analyst. As code breakers, students explored how they played the digital game and identified its rules. In the role of text user, students were making meaning of the digital games by comparing different games and their gameplay across platforms as well as whether they played alone or with other gameplayers. As text participants, they interrogated the game's purpose and narrative, the genre of the game, when they played the game as well as their role(s) in the game during gameplay. Taking up the role of text analysts, students explored why they liked certain games over others and ways they could improve digital games and gameplay.

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We opted to start with a short module exploring narrative techniques and then began a study of the game *Never Alone (Upper One Games, 2014)*, which is a traditional story told in language from the Iñupiat people of the North American continent. In this game, students would be able to study the narrative and the way the narrative is expressed, alongside the way it teaches players about culture. This was then supplemented with a discussion of depictions of Indigenous Australians in video games.

Students then played through the game *Papers, Please* (3909 LLC, 2013) to investigate narratives around refugees, immigration, and regime change in a fictional country modelled on the Soviet Union. Students looked at the depiction of individuals through the art style, as well as the written dialogue (such as the omission of the definite article 'the' to emulate a Soviet accent). This game was contrasted with a playthrough of *This War Of Mine* (11-bit studios, 2014), which is a Polish game based on the siege of Sarajevo. Students discussed the choices they made and the consequences of these choices on the individuals within the game. A good example of this was one student who said he stole medicine from an elderly poor couple (in the game!) and left them to die because it was only a game and didn't matter - this was at odds with most other students who said they returned the stolen medicine once they realised who owned it because they felt bad. This led to an interesting discussion of Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development.

The unit concluded with the play and study of *The Beginner's Guide* – itself a game created in response to the author's experience of making and releasing *The Stanley Parable*. The game functioned as an exceptional tool to introduce concepts from Roland Barthes' *The Death of the Author* to students and have them engage with literary criticism.

I learned a lot when I first ran this course. Firstly, students preferred playing in small groups to playing individually. Secondly, whilst there was a general assumption that the 'gamer boys' would love this study and be able to employ their experience, generally that didn't always prove true. Some of my colleagues had expressed an assumption that girls might find it more challenging, and this was very much proven wrong, as the top students two semesters in a row were female students. One considered herself a gamer, and the other hadn't been allowed by her parents to play digital games

because she was a girl. Finally, the truism that most students don't complete homework continued to be applicable - even when setting digital gameplay as homework, students didn't always get it done.

### Reflection 3: Brady

In this reflection, I describe the genesis and curriculum design process for a senior English Language Arts/L1 English speciality course titled Digital Game Analysis. This course was offered to 17- and 18-year-old students who chose it as one of three elective courses taken in their senior year. This three-elective course system replaced the Humanities requirement for senior students, allowing them more choice in their focus of study. The course was offered at a moderate, semi-urban secondary school in the southwestern United States. The course was designed as an intentional shift away from a traditional curriculum in which print-centric canonical British and American literature, exams, and literary analysis papers were dominant.

Despite the traditional emphasis within the English curriculum at our school, a few collaborators and I had experimented with language arts course design, creating units in which students chose texts, and wrote about their out-of-school literacy practices through multimodal essays. Through these units, it became clear that, as the boundaries of what was considered acceptable literacy in the class expanded, so too did the pool of students who devoted themselves to their work (Johnston, 2019). I read student work focussed on rap music, *Dungeons and Dragons*, cookbooks, and a host of diverse literacy practices, including digital games. This curricular work served as a springboard to my creation of a digital game studies course for the Senior Humanities curriculum the following year. The main difference was that instead of books, we would focus on digital games. In my proposal to our school administration, I described the course this way:

In the 9-12 sequence in Humanities/English at Southwest High School (a pseudonym), students receive rigorous preparation in reading classic works of literature. However, students have limited opportunities in class to apply critical thinking skills and analytical prowess to multimodal texts or more contemporary media. There is little sense of "a textual world" outside of assigned readings, one in which the types of texts they are most likely to encounter outside of the classroom can serve as sites for making meaning, powerful aesthetic experiences, or conducting analysis. My hope for this class is that it will add to their sense of textuality by allowing them to practise analytical reading and writing skills on challenging, non-traditional texts.

This course was designed in a fairly traditional style, with an emphasis on analysis, writing, discussion, and common practices of L1 English. I saw the course as part of a shift in thinking about the English curriculum that would welcome a wider variety of multimodal and contemporary texts for critical study.

Designing a game course in the mould of an English classroom almost immediately raised questions about how a discipline traditionally built around analytical approaches to texts perceived as containing extant meaning could operate with texts designed explicitly to be interacted with over time. One cannot, for example, examine a game as a static object the way one can look at a page. A game must be played over time. My students couldn't refer back to a moment in a game and have their classmates see the same moment; in fact, each person might experience the moment differently since each playthrough is different.

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To address this, I structured the course using two main approaches: (1) shared play in which the class would play a segment of a game together while sharing a controller, and (2) individual play more explicitly tied to reader-response theory (see Rosenblatt, 1938), an approach to literary reading that emphasises meaning-making as a product of an individual's interaction with text. The first would allow

the class to discuss shared moments, while the second would allow students to explore their own playthroughs and meaning-making over time. I planned the course around these structures, with exploratory and analytical discussions connecting our work to the more traditional analysis skills of the English classroom. These activities would be followed both by traditional essay writing and work in written genres that often surround games in popular culture, such as reviews or walkthroughs. I intended to build upon this structure through ongoing iterations of the course that would allow students to apply the kinds of critical analysis that occur in English classrooms to multimodal texts often considered appropriate only for leisure or out-of-school spaces, at the same time that I, as a teacher and curriculum designer, worked to expand on the planned pedagogical structures through which we approached digital games in the classroom.

Since teaching this class, many teachers, including my collaborators on this paper, have done a lot of exciting work with digital games in English classrooms, asking questions related to what constitutes play, form, medium, composition, identity and narrative in a medium that, although is now decades old and enjoys its own academic attention, still remains underutilised and understudied in K-12 school settings. It is hard to do this work alone, and I believe the best way forward for educators is to work together, to share successes and challenges, and to develop more established and publicly available approaches to design curricula around games in secondary school spaces.

#### Reflection 4: Josh

I work in a regional multi-campus Victorian government high school that focuses on Years 7 to 9 (ages 12-14), where we have struggled with student engagement across most of our learning areas. Our decision to use a digital game as part of an English classroom text analysis in 2018 was the product of a lot of things happening at once. I had taken on the role of co-leader of our English domain alongside my colleague, who was also new to the role, and we were brainstorming options to replace a unit of work in Year 8. Our conversations seemed to take us in different directions but usually revolved around text comparison, studying multimodality, and a desire to include at least one text of Australian indigenous storytelling. Around this time, we contacted an academic (Alex) who had done work with digital games in English and asked if they were interested in supporting us. I sent through a long list of games that I had already been considering for a potential Year 9 elective class on digital games as text, and from this we began collaborating. My school's leadership and curriculum teams were extremely supportive and interested in seeing how this new approach might provide a positive experience for students who were struggling in our English classrooms.

The early emails and initial meetings revolved largely around establishing the curriculum focus for the unit of work. From the initial list of games, *Never Alone (Upper One Games, 2014)* seemed best suited to addressing all three of the topics we had discussed. The game features strong multimodality in the form of its artwork, animations, narration, and inclusion of documentary footage. The game is short enough to allow time for comparison with other texts. The game's narrative is based on an indigenous Iñupiat story, giving us opportunities to make comparisons with traditional Aboriginal Australian story-telling. This would allow students to analyse the similarities and differences in approaches to characterisation and storytelling between these seemingly disparate cultures and formats.

Outside of the curriculum focus, several limiting factors were identified in our early planning. First was the fact that as a 'bring your own device' (BYOD) school, using iPads as our recommended device, there were few games available on the iPad platform with a narrative focus. I had already played *Never Alone* previously on my PC and knew it would suit our intended goals, but I wasn't sure how well the game ran on a platform with no physical controller. Second was cost; at first glance, \$8 (AUD) per copy of the game seemed too steep for our budget, though we found we could bulk-buy for \$4 per copy, and we successfully applied for a grant to purchase our first batch of game codes. Finally, running this unit across an entire year level at two campuses, we needed to know we could help guide and troubleshoot the installation of the game for around 300 students across 14 classrooms, including a large number of teachers who had never played a digital game themselves. Our school uses an online learning management system to host and deliver our curriculum, so our teachers were already skilled in using digital platforms, and the system allowed us to include links, digital forms, and video walkthroughs that demonstrated the installation and running of the game. I was also able to visit the classes of teachers who wanted additional support or invite them to visit our classes while we set up the system for our own students.

Many students who love digital games are happy to play something new and different and appreciate that the school is trying to connect to their interests, while many others are upset that we didn't pick a game they already know and love, or at least a game that looks and feels more modern.

The students that I've taught, and the student experiences that have been passed on to me by my colleagues, reflect the same range of emotions, from positive to neutral to negative, that we tend to see with every other type of text we teach in our English classrooms. Some students enjoy the mystical nature of the story while others find it too 'childish.' Some students are engaged by the culture and settings of the game's world while others find it too unfamiliar to properly understand. Many students who love digital games are happy to play something new and different and appreciate that the school is trying to connect to their interests, while many others are upset that we didn't pick a game they already know and love, or at least a game that looks and feels more modern. Some students have expressed happiness that they finally feel they are 'experts' at engaging with an English text (particularly students with known reading difficulties), while other students who are usually the 'best' students in the room when we study novels feel that they are being locked out of the ability to complete their work because they find the platforming or puzzle aspects of the game too challenging and would rather watch a playthrough of the game on YouTube, missing out on much of the experience of gameplay. We are currently progressing through our sixth iteration of this unit, and it is interesting to note how every year raises new and familiar questions regarding engagement, critical analysis, behaviour management, and assessment outcomes, just as it does with every other English unit we teach.

The consensus from staff and students is that the unit is a success despite its challenges. Our game-averse teachers did not have their minds changed completely, but they appreciated the positive impact the unit had on many of their students. We have worked with our IT department to create an approach where game access codes can be revoked for re-use at the end of the unit, reducing the cost to the English department. Most importantly, we have created a small group of teacher 'games as text' experts who can now support colleagues who are making their first attempt at the unit. Adding a digital game to our English curriculum has broadened the scope of our curriculum and the minds of our teachers and learners.

## Themes

From the reflections shared above, we have identified four themes that capture the complexity of curriculum design that accompanies planning for the game-centred classroom.

### Engaging with students' out-of-school literacies

Using digital games in the classroom to increase engagement and provide a positive experience for students is a common theme across these reflections. Two levels of disengagement informed this sentiment. Firstly, there was a belief that students were struggling to connect with schooling due to COVID-19 lockdowns that closed schools and forced all learning online. The well-reported disruption caused by lockdowns and school closures (Kim & Asbury, 2020; Owen et al., 2022) led many teachers to consider connecting with students' out-of-school textual pleasures as a way to increase engagement with schooling.

Secondly, there is a sense that current approaches to text study are inadequate for 21st-century school learning. The idea that the canon of print-based literature is removed from the kinds of texts that students engage with outside of school highlights the importance of relevance for these teachers. Their planning was informed by an explicit interest in the textual interests of students, a stance consistent with personal growth philosophies of English that seek to legitimise the formation of students' lifeworlds (Dixon, 1975) and reject the notion that students need to be saved from themselves through so-called moralising works (see Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994, for a

discussion of this phenomenon). The turn towards youth literacies can also be understood as a turn towards what Moll et al., (1992) characterise as funds of knowledge. Moll et al. argue that by capitalising on the knowledge and skills found in households and communities, classroom instruction, and through this learning, can be improved. Reconnecting with the social worlds of their students is one way that the teachers in our narratives justified their pivot towards digital games.

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Importantly, this pivot was about much more than the mere celebration of out-of-school literacies. Mark's reference to the visual literacy of students, Ben's desire to expand 'cultural literacy' levels, and Josh's mention of textual comparison, are examples of the types of practices that informed the why and how of their curriculum designs.

### Planning for skill and knowledge development

The desire to pursue novel curriculum design for objectives beyond increasing engagement is evident in rhetoric associated with skills and knowledge. A utilitarian motivation can be discerned across all four reflections, whereby the educational utility of games is established through connections to the goals of schooling broadly, more specifically, the goals of English teaching. This rhetoric is found in the pitches from Mark and Brady towards their respective school leadership teams. Both make explicit links between the goals of their Units and the conceptual knowledge highly valued by subject-English. Reference to using digital games for the examination of dilemmas, cultures and historical events (Mark), as well as the development of critical thinking skills and analytical prowess (Brady), can be understood in terms of the context of these statements. They are intended to convince school administrators to move away from the pendulum side which emphasises the dangers and detrimental effects of game playing, and towards the side of the pendulum which stresses how game playing can be beneficial to young people and their learning (see Grimes, 2021, for a more detailed articulation of the pendulum dynamic as it relates to gameplaying).

. References to specific knowledge and skills are useful ways of alleviating the fears of those not in these classrooms. However, the specificity of the knowledge and skills referenced suggest something else about the relationship between context and curriculum design.

What emerges throughout the reflections are tensions between meeting the demands of external educational authorities and designing a game-centred curriculum that is context-specific.

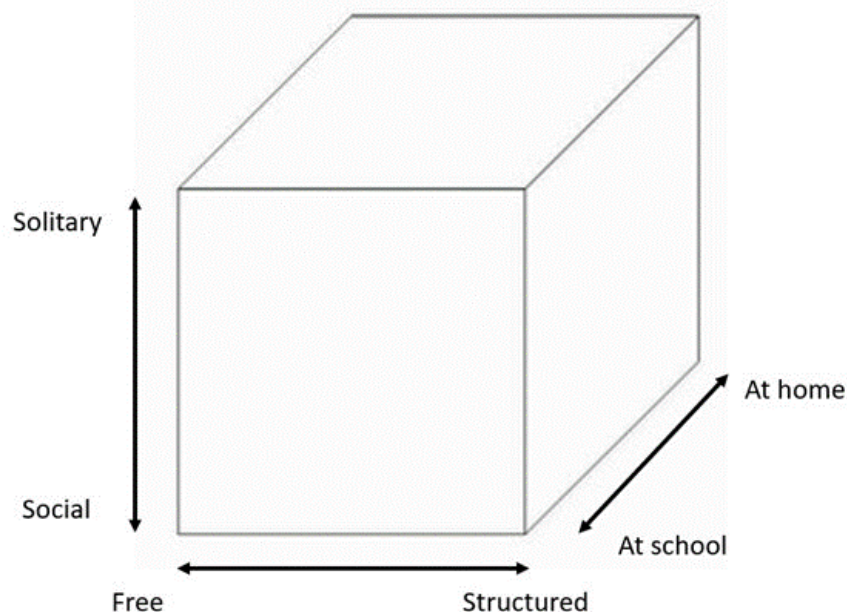
What is noticeable about the knowledge and skills that all four teachers identify as important to their Units is their specificity to L1 English. Across the reflections, there are many allusions to curriculum demands. The skills and knowledge identified are situated within notions of curriculum as an educational reality that exists both inside and outside of the schools in question. For example, the reflections include mentions of: 'our English curriculum', 'curriculum content', 'senior secondary curriculum in this jurisdiction', 'curriculum outcomes,' 'key component of the English curriculum,' 'meet curriculum goals,' and a 'shift away from traditional curriculum.' What emerges throughout the reflections are tensions between meeting the demands of external educational authorities and designing game-centred curricula that are context-specific. As already mentioned, one way that teachers navigated this tension was by arguing that their units sought to develop highly specific skills and knowledge associated with English. What is clear is that decisions about skills and knowledge, and how to design the curriculum which developed these, were a product of entanglements between personal, school, and societal expectations about school English.

## Addressing the challenges of play

As has been found in other studies exploring the multiple ways that play can be structured in the digital game classroom (Bacalja & Nash, 2023), these reflections demonstrate the importance of exploring how teachers plan for student gameplay in the digital game-centred classroom. For example, Ben reported a concern that due to the Bring Your Own Device policy of his school, students might play the game at home, and possibly complete the game in their own time. The concern is that teacher efforts to maintain control over the progression through the game, and the subsequent discussion about the evolution of the story and themes, are threatened by those students who have already completed the game and as a result might disengage from structured activities. There is an interesting irony here. Around the world, there is evidence that students are not reading enough. In particular, researchers have expressed unease regarding school reading (dis)engagement (Barber & Klauda, 2020; Ellis & Coddington, 2013). Yet, in the digital game classroom, too much engagement is perceived by some as problematic. In some instances, student interest in the text, and concerted efforts to progress through the text in their own time, are constructed as risky, rather than beneficial. When and how students 'read' the digital games they are studying are complex questions.

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Brady's distinction between shared play and individual play provides a rich example of how teachers consider the intentionality of their pedagogical decision-making. The juxtaposition between shared play as a tool for producing "shared moments" for discussion, and individual play as a means for exploring their interactions with the games, suggests that like the many forms of reading practices that are deployed by classroom teachers (see Duke & Pearson, 2002), teachers can differentiate play for different learning objectives. We see evidence of these different approaches in Bacalja and Clark's (2021) 'Pedagogies of Play' schema (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Bacalja and Clark's (2021) Pedagogies of Play visualises the multiple intersecting forms that digital play can take in the classroom.

Reflecting on 14 teachers' implementation of the same digital game curriculum, Bacalja and Clark use this schema to demonstrate how play pedagogies can be instantiated on multiple levels.

We are also reminded in our teacher reflections that despite much of the hype around games and their play affordances (as evident in Gee, 2003) there will always be students who either don't want to play games or lack the game skills (for example, operating the controller or navigating the screen interface) to engage in classroom play. This is evident in Josh's account where the platforming and puzzle aspects of *Never Alone* were reported as too challenging for some students who chose instead to watch playthroughs of the game on YouTube. This is a fascinating observation for several reasons. Firstly, it counters universalising discourses which assert that all students possess basic game-playing skills simply because they have been raised in broader cultural contexts where digital games and game cultures have proliferated, an argument that challenges the assumptions that underpin Prensky's "digital natives" metaphor.

Secondly, it reveals that some of those earlier motivations for designing a game-centred curriculum, namely to increase engagement, may contribute to increased disengagement for some students. Finally, it raises epistemological concerns about how knowledge about a game comes to be constructed. Is there a difference between playing a game to learn about its story and watching somebody else play the game? Does it matter that students are holding a controller and leading an avatar around a digital world, or is it enough to watch a peer engage in such play? Interestingly, there is evidence to suggest that those playing digital games for the purposes of language recall less vocabulary in comparison with those watching their peers in the same contexts, with the study's authors suggesting that the cognitive load caused by the interactivity of gameplay (see deHaan, Reed and Kuwada, 2010). As Bacalja and Nash (2023) found in their systematic review of case studies of digital games brought to L1 English classrooms, there is a rich and complex diversity of forms that play takes in these contexts. Rather than proclaiming a single-play pedagogy, sensitivity to each context's possibilities will be an important factor in determining how individual teachers leverage play for learning.

### Issues of access and equity

As interactive multimodal texts, digital games present a unique set of technical challenges that educators should consider when they engage in designing curriculum around a specific game.

The first issue, as noted by Mark in his reflection, relates to school policies regarding the provision of texts. Schools are usually well-versed in purchasing copies of print, audio, and visual media that can be loaned to students or teachers for the duration of a unit of work. However, the provision of a copy of a digital game is intertwined with other technical realities, such as the ownership of technological hardware. Playing digital games in classrooms gives rise to numerous technical considerations, including platform selection (console, computer, mobile, etc), hardware requirements (hard drive space, internet connection, peripheral devices, etc), and input devices (controller, mouse and keyboard, touchscreen, VR headset, etc). This last aspect stands out when considering the needs of students with physical or neurological disabilities who may require adaptive input devices. In cases where schools provide devices to students – either individually through the use of laptops and tablets or by providing class-wide platform access through a computer lab – selection will likely be limited to games that are compatible with the school's primary platform. Where schools use a 'Bring Your Own Device' (BYOD) approach, games will likely need to be selected based on broad compatibility, which to an extent rules out console-exclusive games, which lack the same portability of laptops and tablets.

A second issue related to access and equity relates to legal requirements regarding parental permission to engage with texts that are rated by legal classification authorities. In Australia, where three out of our four case studies took place, all digital games are assigned a rating by the Australian Classification Board. Teachers selecting games for study must consider the age-appropriateness of their selections, as determined by game classifications, as well as parental and community perception of digital games more broadly. The possibility that some students will not be given parental permission to play and study a digital game raises significant risk for teachers and schools and is likely to lead towards conservative selection decisions.

Finally, the issue of technological impermanence, and digital game preservation, raises genuine questions about the viability of digital game-centred curricula. While digital technologies are often lauded for their capacity to situate human interaction in seemingly infinite digital worlds (see Castronova, 2008), access to these worlds is entirely dependent on functioning hardware and software. The constant rate of technological development is equally matched by technological

obsolescence. Put plainly, as new software and hardware emerge, older software and hardware become obsolete. In the context of schooling, where finite budgets place pressure on every expenditure, questions about the sustainability of digital games are real. This issue emerges in the reflections above in terms of game licenses. Mark's comments about the transportability of Steam codes, coupled with Josh's reference to the cost of codes and the ability to 'revoke' licenses so that games can be used in subsequent years without requiring further costs are not trivial. These comments draw attention to one of the major differences between traditional text study and digital game study: materiality. A school that purchases a class set of novels which are stored in the school library can expect to be able to rely on these resources for decades. It would be a brave person to expect the same ease of access for any digital game, let alone one that is dependent on a range of other software and hardware. In Hayles' *Electronic Literature* (2008), the author highlights the fluid nature of digital media as an obstacle to establishing the kinds of traditions and influence associated with print literature. The design of the curriculum which privileges digital games for play and study cannot escape difficult decisions about game and platform selection which will impact the longevity of units of teaching.

## Conclusion

We began this paper by referring to the potential of popular culture texts to transform schooling. Our experience reflecting on the design and implementation of digital game-centred curricula has served at least two purposes. Firstly, we have come to appreciate the value of curriculum inquiry. That is, reconceptualising curriculum as a complex story. It is one thing to plan and design curricula with the intent of leveraging highly sophisticated digital game worlds to increase engagement. Our reflections suggest that there is much that can be gained by engaging in curriculum inquiry which shifts from the study of documents to "the interdisciplinary study of educational experiences" (Pinar, 2004, p. 2). Secondly, our analysis reminds us of the value of resisting essentialist or deterministic rhetoric about what digital games alone can do in classrooms.

Those engaged in the design of curriculum are in a constant state of negotiation which neither starts nor ends with the production of material artefacts. We conclude by advocating for approaching such design through Fawn's (2022) notion of entanglement. That is, viewing technology, and the use of technology for school learning, as always inseparable from other phenomena, such as teaching methods, purposes, values and contexts. Despite an abundance of research making claims as to the outcomes of game-centred learning, Fawn's emphasis on complexity and negotiation is a timely reminder for those designing digital games' curricula, namely, that we should be cautious about overly optimistic goals that place too much faith in the technologies themselves.

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