What do we learn in Smethwick Village? Computer games, media learning and discursive confusion

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This article presents findings from research exploring the intervention made by the introduction of computer games as an object of study in Media Studies at AS level in England. The outcome is a range of discursive data in the form of teachers and students from two English colleges talking about their experiences of this curriculum encounter. This article is informed by the existing body of research exploring computer games as transgressive texts, with particular emphasis on the extent to which they transgress traditional text–reader relations, offering players the opportunity to both read and write the story. This existing field spans gaming and literacy, ludology and narratology, psycho-analytical readings of identity-play and explicit work on computer games in (and for) education. This research shifts the focus to the 'languaged' relationships between Media Studies teacher, student and game; and play, curriculum and assessment, respectively. The article explores the complexities at stake in teachers' and students' ideas about these discursive framings as articulated in statements made about games—between public and private learning contexts, play and assessment. The findings of the enquiry reveal a 'disconnect' between the transgressive aspirations of Media teachers embracing games as objects for study and the profoundly traditional assessment context which frames the encounter.

Introduction

> I play games when I have nothing better to do, which is most of the time. (Student interview)

This article deals with three themes in relation to the introduction of computer games as an area of study in Media Studies in England—(1) the textual status of computer games in relation to literacy; (2) the kinds of learning computer games offer within private realms of the lifeworld (Moran, 2000); and (3) attempts by educators to design games *in relation to* the curriculum and to deal with existing commercial games *within* the curriculum (Media Studies attempts the third theme). The research differs

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from much of the field in that it takes student and teacher discourse as its data. It also explores the evident confusion between these themes, as articulated by teachers and students engaged in the study of games.

We play computer games as we read them. The representation of the player on the screen, embodied in a character (the avatar) produces the story, so we are also writing, albeit within a range of pre-determined narrative options. Media Studies students in the English West Midlands, studying *The Sims* as a text, but doing this by playing the game (constructing a virtual 'Smethwick Village' society), are therefore players, authors, readers and analysts *at the same time*.

There is a wealth of research into the possibilities for games to transgress traditional text–reader relations (Wolf & Perron, 2003; Newman, 2004; Carr *et al.*, 2006), their potential not only for 'active play' but also for transformative learning, inside or outside of educational settings (Gee, 2003, 2003a; Squire & Jenkins, 2003; Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004; Wallace, 2006) and ways in which it is initiated can respond to the 'moral panic' (Cohen, 1980) mobilised by the parent culture.

However, there seems to be a gap in the field at this point. Game players who are also students in formal educational settings appear to have been spoken *for*, with little evidence of their own voices being heard. This article raises the question of the 'disconnect' that may arise from formal educational attempts to colonise the kinds of learning that take place in game playing, by bearing witness to the insulation perceived by games players between private realms of the lifeworld and the classroom.

There appear to be three emerging discourses that pervade the field at the current time as discussed below: (1) games as objects of study, (2) games in education and (3) play learning.

Games as objects of study

Carr *et al.* (2006) conducted a range of research, based at the Institute of Education in London, and have contributed a number of perspectives on computer games as texts, from a reflective Media Studies vantage point (i.e. a position which questions the prevailing assumptions of the subject in relation to narrative in particular). Drawing on the work of Jenkins (2004) in episodic play and spatial exploration, Murray (2000) on 'procedural authorship' and Grodal (2003) on 'embodied narrative', Carr suggests that a cultural analysis of computer games must embrace their being situated at a theoretical crossroads, at which we must bear witness to these texts as games and as narratives simultaneously. Similarly, Friedman (1995) distinguishes computer games from 'older' narrative forms, such as novels, by their provision of interactive textuality through a 'feedback loop' (from player to programme).

> Computer games reveal their own constructedness to a much greater extent than traditional texts. The player moulds his or her strategy through trial and error experimentation to see 'what works'—which actions are rewarded and which are punished. Likewise, the extensive discourse on game strategy in manuals, magazines, bulletin boards and guides like *The Official SimCity Planning Commission Handbook* exposes the 'inner relationships' of the simulation to help players succeed more fully. (Friedman, 1995, p. 5)

This last point is crucial. One cannot understand the narrative diegesis of games with-out attention to the 'extra textual' layer of memory storage, downloads, cheats guides and player sites. Whereas for a film, a proliferation of material around the text will add meaning for sure, it would seem *more* fundamental to the narrative itself in the case of games.

Games in education

This article is not concerned with 'edutainment' games—those that are designed explicitly to 'be educational'. However, confusion is evident in Media teachers' responses to games between arguments for studying existing commercial games and claims for games to be transformative learning tools. In relation to this second theme, the English Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA) published a policy review of research and literature (Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004). At times clumsily switching between an 'effects' discourse and an educational perspective, the main findings were that whilst frequent gaming could have a harmful effect on schoolwork, computer games were seen to have a range of educational benefits. The LSDA recommended seeking 'a greater understanding of the games culture to find ways of designing real learning games that appeal to young people and that could have strong and positive impact on their education' (Mitchell & Savill-Smith, 2004, p. 58). This approach is symptomatic of a recurrent attempt to engage with games as a means of delivering the existing curriculum.

Play learning

By contrast, others view the transgressive nature of games as more oppositional to conventional schooling. Kress (2003) suggests that as the screen replaces the book as the dominant medium (and increasingly *playing* the screen challenges *watching*) this shift necessitates a reconceptualisation of our understandings both of literacy and of particular forms of the imagination. Gee (2003, 2003a) claims provocatively that Nintendo are better placed to facilitate learning than American high-school teachers, arguing that one can easily find 36 key-learning principles in 'good' computer games, but far fewer in any one classroom experience. Gee's contribution is to offer a view of game playing as literacy development *in itself*, as to learn a game is essentially a form of language acquisition.

Of course, sceptics point to the lack of any real engagement with pedagogy in the work of Gee (2003), Kress (2003) and Johnson (2005), who all offer abstract theories of learning in relation to games. It is important to explore the distinctions between these perspectives in relation to Bernstein's (1990) notion of insulation, which we shall return to in detail when scrutinising our discursive findings. Both Kress and Gee's respective expositions on new ways of literacy and 'good learning' in games challenge educators to reduce the insulation between systemworld education and informal 'pleasure learning', and to bear witness to the 'unknowable' realms of the lifeworld. However, Bernstein's theory of discursive framing as the practice of power

leaves little room for such optimism. Indeed, an application of Bernstein's model of classification will demand a sceptical interpretation of the claims made for games to transform learning.

Curriculum

In England, OCR is the leading awarding body for A Level Media (taken mostly by 16- to 19-year olds in post-compulsory education). A Level is split into AS (year one) and A2 (year two). The current OCR AS Media Studies specification introduces computer games as a topic for study in the context of a comparative study of two games in terms of the representation in each of conflict and competition. Here the application of media theory (the concept of *representation* in relation to *audience*) to this new form of text is framed by a written exam outcome, as opposed to production, or practice, through which framing a student might design a game. Thus, there is no obligation for students to play games: they can study the games as texts, just as they would study a film without the need to be in one. However, at the two English colleges visited for the research (one Further Education College and one Sixth Form College) Media teachers were facilitating learning about games through students playing them in the classroom. The rationale for this approach is that, unlike other media forms, one cannot read a game without writing it.

Whilst Media Studies has always been practiced in a space between 'theory' and everyday consumption and indeed the 'discourse of derision' that surrounds it (Barker, 2001) arises from this engagement with the popular, bolder claims have been made for the 'difference' of computer games, as one of the teachers interviewed shows:

> More technological developments are bound to impact on the way we think about games as narratives and representational texts and whether the relationship between player and text will be transformed. So it no longer makes sense to look at games in the same way we look at, say, films. (Teacher 1)

At each college, Media teachers working with students in this area were interviewed, and a focus group was held with a sample of students. In addition, at the Further Education College, four lessons were observed. Media teachers might assume that the intervention made by bringing toys into the classroom will automatically enhance engagement and/or motivation, by reaching out into previously closed off aspects of the *lifeworld*. Thus, the key research questions here are:

1. What degree of *insulation* between 'pleasure learning' and classroom learning exists?
2. What is the relationship between games and study and does the classroom experience *reinforce, challenge or abstract* such relations?

The recorded discussions with students and teachers are here interpreted using discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995), a methodology which takes the participants' recorded statements as data from which to explore competing ideas about the 'ideal subject' of media teaching and learning in relation to this specific curriculum

intervention. Hence, the data gathered are representative, in the sense that it speaks (locally) to the contemporary condition of 'Subject Media' in relation to the study of games.

The contrasting positions of Gee (2003, 2003a) and Bernstein (1990) inform these questions. For Gee there is space for such an overlap or recontextualising impulse in formal education, providing teachers can view gaming—or at least 'good' games—in new ways (fundamentally as a form of literacy practice). For Bernstein, however, insulation and framing are far too robust to be weakened by such 'bridging' attempts which are always-already framed by the traditional idioms of pedagogic discourse. Bernstein's (1990) contribution to the analysis of educational discourse has been to assert that the nature of pedagogic discourse is as a reproducer of power relations *in and of itself*, as opposed to something external to it. Teachers and students talking about the curriculum, teaching and learning and play offer data that demonstrate the articulation of such discourse, but not the discourse which represents or mirrors, or 'puts into words' a set of classifications that already exist. By far the most entertaining explanation of classification Bernstein offers is his lavatory analogy:

> Imagine four lavatories. The first is stark, bare, pristine, the walls are painted a sharp white; the washbowl is like the apparatus, a gleaming white. A square block of soap sits cleanly in an indentation in the sink. A white towel (or perhaps pink) is folded neatly on a chrome rail or hangs from a chrome ring. The lavatory paper is hidden in a cover and peeps through its slit. In the second lavatory there are books on a shelf and some relaxing of the rigours of the first. In the third there are books on the shelf, pictures on the wall and perhaps a scattering of tiny objects. In the fourth lavatory the rigour is totally relaxed. The walls are covered with a motley array of postcards, there is a various assortment of reading matter and curios. The lavatory roll is likely to be uncovered and the holder may well fall apart in use. We can say that as we move from the first to the fourth lavatory we are moving from a strongly classified to a weakly classified space, by a space regulated by strong rules of exclusion to a space regulated by weak rules of exclusion. (Bernstein, in Halsey *et al.*, 1997, p. 76)

Here we are seeing the 'rules of exclusion' as the boundaries between gaming and formal education, between 'living' games and studying games as objects. The interviewed teachers offered contrasting responses to the question of insulation. In the following two comments, classification is strong for the first respondent and weaker for the second:

> I think there is an ambience and a culture in classrooms which means students know they are there to learn and the border between learning environment and playing environment is still there. So I think the idea that all of a sudden you put a machine in the room and it changes all that is not realistic. And also the focus on conflict and competition [in the exam specification] makes the games the object of the study which is very different to spending time playing in isolation from the usual experience students have in Media. (Teacher 1)

> In terms of the transformative nature of it also one of the things it has forced us to do is to rethink the classroom for other units [of the course], so we have changed the layout to make it much more activity based because we felt that the games sessions were quite different to anything else we did, and though not entirely like practical work, there is much more of a sense of group work, so it is a kind of mixture. While they are in their group they are so engrossed in what they are doing that you are handing over control to a large degree and

we try to do that as well with the shape of the classroom, because we felt this was a better way of doing things. (Teacher 2)

These ways of thinking, talking and writing about computer games and learning are discursive and situated. As educationalists seek to absorb such activity into their communities of practice, a tension arises if they do not bear witness to the conditions of possibility for such a shift. The 'disconnect' between the private realms of the life-world (Moran, 2000), in which computer games have power as cultural tools and the educational systemworld (Sayer, 1999) is equally discursive. This paradox is constructed in the orthodox acceptance of boundaries and insulation between classi-fied domains of social experience (between formal learning and play).

The most helpful conceptualisation for our purposes here is provided by Sayer (1999) who distinguishes 'systemworld' (which includes formal education) from life-world. The important dynamic to consider is the inevitability of the embedding of systemworld in lifeworld—so a student's lifeworld will include formal educational experiences. This reminds us to avoid constructing an opposition, of seeing lifeworld and systemworld as insulated from one another. In this article, we are concerned with the relationship between the ways in which various kinds of learning might take place in the lifeworld when people play computer games and the formal analysis of games within the systemworld, in formal education. The key questions for attention are to do with what transformations take place, for players who experience a potential 'over-lap' between college and play, and for non-players who are introduced to games in an unexpected context (the classroom).

Clearly, the dominant discourse of the standardised curriculum, in the context of which the 'reaching out' into the lifeworlds of computer gamers might be viewed as hegemonic as much as empowering (or perhaps both simultaneously), is perpetuated by classifications that students reinforce through their own articulations of the differ-ence between learning and play. Their teachers articulate a desire to engage with games in the Media Studies curriculum as a departure point from traditional textual study, but there are different views on how well the conceptual framework can adapt to these texts:

For a teenager, I would guess that you probably ask for a PS2 or an Xbox as a Christmas present, so this is a product you own, whereas with soap operas you don't make that choice, to own that object. In terms of the actual games, in common with the rest of the subject I don't think it's actually necessary to be a fan. If anything, that can be a barrier at times. And because the broad base of Media as a subject involves connections between different texts, the point is that the structure of games in narrative will be the same in some ways to the structure of television and film, for example, so there is a consistent approach across these areas. (Teacher 1)

There is a huge argument amongst games academics themselves about whether the games are interactive narratives or whether it is the idea of ludology—game playing—so we try to get them thinking about narrative and structure, levels and progressing, and this is getting them into the kind of conceptual stuff which is not getting covered anywhere else, and they need to understand it to write about it. And then the idea of character action within the game—what is that character doing, is it representing you, doing your moves? And then in *Sing Star*, in player action, it is either kinaesthetic skills or movement represented on

screen. The conflict is on screen a competitive element, how am I doing, how are my movement and position determining the game? You can't go into it thinking this is going to be like Film Studies, looking at mise en scene and camera work and so on because games don't function like films. (Teacher 3)

Here we witness a contrast between a more and less cautious response to the notion of a necessary 'paradigm shift'. Teacher 1 is confident that the existing conceptual framework for textual analysis can 'hold firm' whilst Teacher 2 fore-grounds the kinaesthetic experience of play for which it seems there is no space in the traditional model. There seems to be a connection between Teacher 1's more guarded response to the classification of this new form of media learning and the same respondent's relatively conservative comments (under 'Curriculum' section) on its framing. In other words, Teachers 2 and 3 witness a shift both in conceptual work (it has to be different from film analysis) and in pedagogy (the classroom ambience has to be different). On this evidence, it would seem plausible to connect their views on the analytical endeavour from their attitudes towards the pedagogical relation-ships themselves.

Classroom practice observed

In the observed lessons, students took part in a variety of activities and discussions with a focus on comparing representation (one of the key concepts for Media Studies in England) of conflict and competition in *Medal of Honor* and *The Sims*.

In all observed lessons, students were playing Playstation 2 games with the console connected to a monitor. The teacher used the 'spectacle' of students playing *Medal of Honor* and *The Sims* in four ways over three lessons. In one lesson, the experience of gaming was the area for study. Volunteers, in turn, played *Eye Toy* games, cleaning windows and boxing using the specific spatial facility created by this technology (you move your hands in the air to navigate menus, as a camera on top of the screen reads your manoeuvres). The rest of the students observed the game playing as the teacher prompted their analysis with questions about the gaming experience, types of learning and by setting up discussion about the future development of games: will the type of gaming predicted in *Existenz* be with us sooner rather than later; and will film seem like a very old medium shortly due to its lack of an interactive, ludic dimension?

The following week, *Medal of Honor* was treated as a text for analysis. At some points, the cut scenes were played as a video sequence for analysis (students were considering ways in which the player is motivated by the missions, ways in which the enemy—the Nazis—is constructed, and the American ideology represented by such a narrative), and at other times students took turns to play various chapters. Whilst this was happening other students were engaged in directed textual analysis, and the novelty of gaming in the classroom was shortly replaced by a traditional 'watch and make notes' approach. The teacher questioned each player and related their responses to the conceptual focus. In particular, students were thinking about team-work in the game in the context of military practices, and ways in which conflict between nations is constructed as a battle between teams, in contrast to the popular

derision aimed at gamers as solitary, socially ineffective individuals. A reflective approach to learning was evident in this structure, due to the interplay between the teacher (as 'carrier' of theory), students as players and students as analysts.

In the final observed lesson, the teacher set up a 'carousel' of activities. Students, in turn played *The Sims*—developing their Smethwick Village community—with a set of contextual questions to consider, focussed on comparing the experience with *Medal Of Honor* in terms of agenda, motivation, learning and understanding of competing/winning. Other students were continuing a practical activity, designing promotional images for an anti-war game (ideas included a Red Cross mission, delivering a letter to an Iraqi general which would stop the war and a game in which the player moves between sides so that she experiences the effects of her previous actions, a game you couldn't win). This allowed the teacher to extend the discussion in terms of the importance of narrative closure and ultimately, victory to the gaming experience. The third task set was a straightforward question and answer analysis of *The Sims* in terms of target audience, representation of competition and player motivation/learning.

Insulation

Several students here articulated a tension between the subject matter of computer games and the enjoyment of playing them. At the same time, some respondents wrote about escapism, whilst others related game playing to social activity and being 'made to think'. When asked how they might be learning while playing games, there was a clear consensus that games involve trial and error, problem solving, reaction speed and strategy, and two students mentioned teamwork. In response to a question about the rationale for studying computer games at college, the focus tended to be on the scale of the games industry (not a mandatory focus of the topic in the exam specification) and technological developments. Only one student mentioned representation (the conceptual focus stipulated), but merely reproduced the unit title, suggesting they had noted the heading but did not feel able or minded to elaborate further.

> Computer games are today's main technology and will in the future become a lot more popular with the wider generation. We will be learning how the computer games work and what techniques are needed to play them, by using different games consoles and the Eye Toy.

> We're learning about computer games as the industry is getting bigger and more advanced. I expect to learn all about the history and plans for the future of computer games.

These statements suggest that students' ideas about the rationale for this curriculum intervention are much more related to business and technology than to textual analysis, despite the framing of the units in each case being made clear by the teachers.

Another theme that emerges from the data is the problem of assessment in *delimiting* (Foucault, 1975) curriculum and pedagogy. The social problem that arises is thus complex, but we can identify, specifically, the tension between the desire of the 'parent culture' to harness the potential of interactive media technologies for the

social good of education and the insulated, strongly classified nature of the school curriculum.

> Since I have started revising for the exam I have been playing the two games I am going to write about and my Mum is like—'why aren't you revising', and I say 'I am revising' (laughs). But they don't understand that! Computer games are seen as something enjoyable, and it is a lot of peoples' pastimes. Conventionally education is not something you do for fun as a child. (Student interview)

Here we witness the discursive tension between common ideas about young peoples' use of digital media and the 'mission' of the curriculum to enrich and survey students' tastes. In addition, traditional epistemological and pedagogical discourses set up the teacher (albeit often a non-gamer) as the one who knows, and learning by playing is configured outside of this dynamic.

As both teachers and students return constantly in their discussions to 'the exam' which serves as a delimiting context for the pedagogic discourse at work, the potential for transgression, it seems, hinges on the extent to which the framing effect of current assessment models can be destabilised.

> The problem is assessment in the end, because the learning that goes on is very difficult to measure as such and the assessment models that we have got are still very much about what they have always been about. So that's very very difficult, and in the long term we need to transform Media Studies completely into New Media, rather than this old fashioned academic model which doesn't suit the students and doesn't suit what we want to talk about really. (Teacher 3)

> It is hard because on the one hand you have constantly got in your mind the fact that you have got to prepare them to write an essay in an exam, but on the other hand you are thinking I really like the open ended possibilities that this generates. Also, there is a sense of doing something transgressive or transformative, and that is the key thing, it is almost goading people, which I've always enjoyed anyway about Media Studies. (Teacher 2)

This perennial tension between the 'spirit' of media teaching and the assessment practices of its institutional form ('Subject Media') has been discussed elsewhere (McDougall, 2006). In both these statements the 'transgression' is set up as external to the mandatory requirements of the curriculum, and the playful nature of the teaching is explicitly related to a desire to be provocative and thus bound up with the identity of the practitioner. However, the majority of students did not articulate *any* sense that the experience of studying computer games in Media Studies lessons had weakened the boundaries between their private lifeworld use of games and the public systemworld of the classroom. A smaller number did describe a shift in pedagogy and the teacher–learner dynamic, which may be attributable to the 'novelty' of toys in the classroom, or maybe a more significant transgression of social practice in the classroom.

Turning to the recorded discussions with students to elaborate, there was considerable evidence of the teacher–learner dynamic shifting as a result of this intervention:

> It is more interactive (than other lessons) even when someone else is playing, cos you're watching them interacting with the game, rather than a film when it's all presented to you.

> Sometimes in Media Studies it's just like looking at other media like with films where you look at scenes, and with games it's only when you actually play them or someone is playing them that it's different to the other lessons.
>
> We've been looking at the learning that goes on when you're playing and with the Eye-Toy, we were watching each other playing and looking at how you learn how to play the game.
>
> It gets lighthearted and everyone tries to join in with the person playing the game and tells them what to do. It brings the group more together I think.
>
> It doesn't really feel like learning. It is fun but you are learning about it at the same time because you are in a different environment, and you are having fun but learning at the same time.
>
> When you are playing you don't really stop and note things down but it only really works when you stop at the end of the lesson and consolidate, when they put it into a teaching format.
>
> When we were all playing games we didn't notice as much all the little things we were actually thinking about until the teachers point it out. We knew they were there, we just didn't focus on them as much.

These statements, in response to questions about interaction (between students, between teacher and student), inclusivity (participation) and the degree of which this kind of learning might be more reflective (playing, whilst learning about playing), indicate a clear understanding of the 'orthodoxy' and how this experience doesn't 'feel' like learning. For example, the point about consolidation (in the sixth comment above) shows how clearly entrenched the notion of a 'teaching format' is. The part of the lesson where students played games is not understood as part of the teaching, it seems. The final statement reveals a suspicion of educational design. In other words, there was a common view amongst the sample that computer games are learning tools, but in spite of themselves. Any attempt to explicitly state education as an objective for game playing would be flawed.

But when it came to questions of insulation, the responses were less animated. Students were asked to comment on the transformative nature of studying/playing games in the classroom, in terms of the 'disconnect' between playing in their own time and explicitly learning with games in college.

> Before I only played certain types of games but now I am more likely to pick up and play *Medal of Honor*, even though I don't really like what it's about, it's just an exciting game and I wouldn't have played it before.
>
> It hasn't made any difference to me.
>
> Nor me, but I play games all the time anyway.
>
> There are still some games I like and others I wouldn't play, but I think more about the meanings of games now.
>
> Yeah, but not really while you are playing them.
>
> I guess you analyse the game more in the way it has been made. Like in Film Studies, you feel like you can't watch films anymore. But with games, it is not quite the same, it is easier to spot different things, and what makes them good.

> I don't really play games any more than I did before but now you can tell how the graphics change and stuff but it doesn't really make any difference to playing. You just notice things more.

> I think I play games a little bit more than I used to, but I don't play different types of games. I still don't play beat em ups because I'm not that kind of person, but you do sort of appreciate the technical sides and how games have changed throughout the years from *Space Invaders* to *Grand Theft Auto*.

> It hasn't really changed that much for me, like everyone else has said I look more in depth when I am playing but I don't think I play more.

These comments from students suggest that the insulation of 'private' gaming from formal study remains intact despite this curriculum intervention. Whilst Teachers 2 and 3 are spirited in their desire to identify a profound shift in both conceptual classification and pedagogic framing, the students' answers seem to have much in common with 'traditional' accounts of how studying films makes a difference to watching them. Expressions like 'looking more in depth', 'sort of appreciate the technical sides' and 'think more about the meaning' do suggest an enhancement of understanding, but 'not while you are playing' speaks to a long-standing dilemma for Media Studies: does media learning make any difference to students' everyday media consumption—and indeed, should it aim to do so? The students interviewed had enjoyed the experience (even the novelty) of this departure from the more established media curriculum and were able to articulate an experiential difference in terms of the classroom. However, there is little evidence here of any more sustained transgression: while there was some (temporary) handing over of power in the classroom, ultimately the gaming experience in the lifeworld remained separate.

Conclusions

It must be stated that this curriculum intervention (the study of games as texts in Media Studies) makes no transformative claims, and whilst the teachers and students interviewed were engaged in learning through playing, other Media teachers are likely to 'deliver' techniques for analysing games in much more traditional ways, avoiding the 'toys in the classroom' dilemma. Thus, there is no inherent reason why students should experience any 'shift' in their relationship to games, or to learning and teaching. However, there is, on this evidence, a profound 'disconnect' in place between the optimism felt by teachers about the potential of games to offer transgressive, more inclusive learning experiences and the power of both insulation (between play and education) and assessment framing (the end-point is an exam *about* games).

Whilst two of the teachers were interested in transformative outcomes, the third was more guarded about the difference between this topic and others on the Media course (see the comment on 'ambience and culture' earlier). For the students, it appeared that two things had been 'lost in translation'. Firstly, they were unclear part way through the scheme of work on the rationale for the topic. Whilst they were aware of the exam focus—representation—they mostly believed that the reason for Media Studies turning to computer games was connected to the power of the games industry

in economic terms, and that the technology itself was a focus for study. Secondly, there was no evident realisation of the emancipatory discourse mobilised by some researchers and writers in the field, apart from a general sense of lessons being more active, interactive and reflective. Clearly this is an early moment in 'games education', especially when we consider that the majority of Media Studies teachers in England do not select this option within the AS Media curriculum.

The three teachers discussed in this article were all doing more than the specification requires. It is possible to teach about games without bringing toys into the classroom, but all three were clear that students have to play the games to study them. Teachers 2 and 3 went further and suggested this approach had informed the rest of their teaching in a way that was unplanned. However, the 'spectre of assessment' was seen to undermine this desire to rework the pedagogic model. Thus, a feeling of frustration pervades alongside the discursive confusion we have witnessed here.

It seems the crossroads at which Media Studies stands is representative of a broader state of confusion amongst educators with an interest in computer games and their 'potential'. The difference between games as objects of study and games as transformative learning experiences is profound—although in both the cases large claims have been made about their impact on traditional pedagogic relationships. The current attention to games in Media Studies does not engage with the latter, although it is interesting to speculate about how it might do so. To say the least, there is a lack of consensus among practitioners over where to go next.

Notes on contributor

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