

# Hitting Restart

## Learning and Gaming in an Australian Classroom

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**V**ideo games are a core part of youth culture, from mobile games such as Angry Birds to story-driven games such as Mass Effect. Many young people spend hours upon hours playing games, researching their systems, and engaging with their stories (Brand, Lorentz, & Mathew, 2014). Research has shown that video games can allow players to immerse themselves in worlds that create a space of play and where rules, economies, narratives, and contexts allow for meaningful learning (Barab & Dede, 2007; Squire, 2013). Consequently, growing numbers of teachers are incorporating new media, including video games, into the curriculum to harness the power and interest that they hold for students (Russell & Beavis, 2012).

Recently, we conducted a study in an Australian high school that introduced a year 9 elective class focused on the creation and analysis of video games. Our research showed that this class unlocked students' learning and motivated them to engage in advanced literacy skills, including critical analysis, creative writing, and programming. In this column, we explore what a couple students have achieved



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in the classroom, particularly through writing a game review and designing a video game.

### Games, Culture, and Learning

Games are learning machines, where players learn how to move through the systems placed in the game, to experience a story or to test their cognitive skills. Gee (2007) called this the situated meaning principle, which describes how players are intrinsically pushed to perform tasks because they are inherently invested in a goal through engagement with the game. Games also create cultural and social structures that young people can become heavily involved in (Gee, 2007). This implies that games are cultural forms of expression, where games are both the creators and the creation of popular culture.

Scholars have suggested that video games are cultural texts in their own right, featuring interactive learning and visual storytelling (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Salen, 2007). Cultural texts can be defined as literary products of a society that are in turn instigators of culture that communicate meaning (Chen, 2013; Steinkuehler, 2010). Examples include J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* novels, the *Game of Thrones* television series, and The Elder Scrolls video games. New technologies can be the enablers of cultural texts, shaping innovative ways that individuals can create texts and engage with digital media (Curwood, 2014; Jewitt, 2008; Lapp, Moss, & Rowsell, 2012).

Alongside the cultural implications of video games, there exists tremendous educational potential. For instance, games like *Quest Atlantis* utilize gaming worlds, quests, goals, and simulated experiences to motivate players to learn (Barab & Dede, 2007). Young people's interests can give momentum and also meaning to their learning, as they traverse through the game world and interact with the real world (Beavis, 2014). Therefore, as youths people



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increasingly engage with video games, the question of how to use them effectively and appropriately as cultural texts to encourage learning comes to the forefront.

### Starting a New Game

Building on the growing body of research on games and learning, an Australian teacher recently introduced a video game class for year 9 students. Jane Shepard (all names are pseudonyms) was motivated to create this class because of her belief that video games are cultural texts. An English teacher with a passion for new media, she thinks that games can motivate young people to be creative and to engage in critical thinking about what they play. She shared, “I think that video games are the epitome of art and culture in the 21st century. I think that’s where the future of art is.” She explained that her main goal was to show that video games are a legitimate textual form that can be used in the classroom, contrary to what the public often says about video games and their impact on today’s youths. A recreational gamer herself, Ms. Shepard believes that games are literary texts and should be regarded similar to novels, films, and poetry.

In the classroom, Ms. Shepard designed three main projects for students: a research project, a game design based on social issues, and a game review. These were designed to stimulate students’ new literacy practices and promote game-based learning. With these projects in place, Ms. Shepard wanted to inspire her students to think about games critically and creatively, thus effectively using their interest in gaming to develop thoughtful and informed ideas about games.

Over the semester, students went beyond even their own expectations of what they could achieve. As participant observers, we interacted with Ms. Shepard and her students throughout the semester. Through observations, interviews, focus groups, and artifacts, such as lesson plans and student work, we examined teaching and learning within this gaming course. Here, we highlight two students, John and Dexter, and discuss how participating in problem solving and game design encouraged them to become both critical gamers and engaged students.

### Rebooting Interest in Learning

According to John, his own learning at school was not his priority. But upon hearing about the class, he immediately enrolled. In the elective class, he often worked with other students who initially thought the class was dedicated to free time with games. To their

expressed disappointment, they actually had to do work. John was part of a group of boys who primarily played competitive online shooter games, such as Counter-Strike: Global Offensive, and saw games as pure entertainment rather than cultural texts. John was a prominent student who eventually worked beyond this mind-set and started to think about games in a critical framework. He learned to question the reason he played certain games and how he played them.

Through the game review project, John produced outstanding work by providing critique and analysis of the third-person action game Watch Dogs. Within the game, players control antihero Aiden Pierce, a computer hacker seeking revenge for the death of his niece by a powerful crime syndicate controlling Chicago. The game introduces an interesting mechanic where players can hack into a system that controls the public infrastructure of Chicago, turning traffic lights off to evade pursuers or using security cameras for reconnaissance.

John’s game review analyzed and critiqued the game, pushing his understanding of the game narrative and mechanics to new levels. In short, he had found a novel way of playing video games after learning about them as literary and cultural texts. For example, he analyzed an online component of the game where other players can hack into his game and steal in-game currency, arguing, “The multiplayer aspect adds a sense of insecurity to the game...minding your own business, without you even knowing someone could be watching you right now.” John also said that this aspect reinforced the theme of the lack of security and privacy that reflects the computer age today. Through this, he exhibited the ability for projected identity (Gee, 2007), where a player is able to experience the game world through perspectives within the game. Inspired by this project, John expressed his interest in starting a YouTube channel to share his views and game critiques with a wider audience.

Similarly, Dexter was initially disinterested and unmotivated in exerting effort in school-based learning. This changed when he was given the opportunity to design a game of his own with a team, with Ms. Shepard directing students to “design games as cultural texts for the social good.” Within the project, students had the freedom to design and produce their game as a team, using programs such as GameMaker. Working with two classmates, Dexter first showed little involvement in designing a role-playing game concerning youth homelessness that they titled “Through the

Streets." However, when he was given the responsibility and opportunity to redesign the problematic main objectives and goals, he put forth effort in his work previously unseen by Ms. Shepard or his classmates.

During the project, their game was initially designed for the character to survive homelessness. Prompted by Ms. Shepard, the group saw this as a perpetuation of the issue, compromising the game's main objective. Dexter took charge, redesigning the game away from survival. At the end of the project, the team's game design was assessed by an independent game developer as the best in the class. Dexter was put into a learning situation that allowed him to not only creatively express his game design knowledge but also harness his interest in games to motivate his learning.

Both John and Dexter are examples of young people who have improved their capacity to learn and produce their own work through a game-based class, which was designed to capture student engagement in video games for the development of their creative and critical literacy skills. By the end of the course, one student concluded, "You're actually starting to learn about games...about what goes into a game, what you should be looking for, and what the difference is between a good game and a bad game." By framing games as cultural texts, and using that as a basis for her students to view video games, Ms. Shepard created a context where games could be used as texts in the classroom (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Gee, 2007). By the end of the semester, both Dexter and John improved their skills in writing, programming, collaborative learning, and creative design.

As teachers and researchers, we suggest that games can convey meaningful messages that youths value (Jewitt, 2008; Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). Technology has changed the ways we communicate, and video games are increasingly becoming a cultural realm for students to explore. Through her gaming class, Ms. Shepard was able to cultivate an environment where students could develop contemporary literacy skills, engage in critical and creative tasks, and see purpose and meaning in their learning. We argue

that teachers can use games as texts for study, as tools to motivate students to be creative problem solvers, and as a way to teach young adults to be critical about what they are playing.

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