

Immersion and Engagement as Concepts and Pedagogy

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A thesis presented for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2024

I, Alison Jane Croasdale, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Abstract

In English secondary schools, after 2013's significant curriculum revisions, teachers of subject-English found themselves leading students towards qualifications that disregarded Media texts, failed to recognise the multiple literacies demanded by the world outside of the classroom, de-emphasised 'speaking and listening' skills, and offered set literary text choices limited in scope and diversity. This thesis, written from the perspective of a teacher-researcher, explores ways in which teachers can adapt their pedagogy to account for digital media texts, multiple literacies, and visual creative work, whilst still meeting the demands of the existing English Literature and English Language GCSE qualifications, with a particular interest in resistant learners. Reformulating the terms 'immersion' and 'engagement' as the theoretical framework for this project, as well as considering the idea of 'third texts' as a means by which students can access challenging literary texts, the work completed here attempts to account for positive classroom interactions with different kinds of text, and reflects on what conditions can foster 'immersion' and 'engagement' for students of different backgrounds and abilities, working towards positive examination outcomes in terms of writing quality. There are two case studies discussed through this framework: one refers to an extra-curricular club running over two school terms, involving 13–15-year-old male and female students exploring the text of *Beowulf*, whilst the second discusses a day-long workshop with thirty four 14-15-year-old girls, exploring the text of *Macbeth*, with both studies occurring in the same East London secondary school where the researcher was employed as an English and Media teacher. The case studies explore digital and creative methods acting as 'third text' proxies to enable students to access challenging GCSE texts, and the conditions required for students to become 'immersed' or 'engaged' in their studies of these texts, with a specific focus on amateur videogame design as the creative method.

Impact Statement

The work completed for this thesis has potential impact both inside of academia, and outside of it, in professional settings including the education sector. Considering the impact inside of academia first, the research completed in terms of exploring intersections between the pedagogy of secondary school English teachers and the processes involved in non-professional videogame making is unusual, and the positive findings from the project contribute to understanding regarding the potential for creative, visual strategies for improving written outcomes for secondary school students, in the form of assessable, exam-style writing. This research also demonstrates what is possible when researching the structure of the English National Curriculum as a site of opportunity for experimentation in teacher practice. Expanding on creative pedagogies in the teaching of Literature, the use of videogame making is a broadly underexploited site of potential, and the work completed for this project demonstrates a methodology for how one might combine the two in different school settings.

Interdisciplinarity as a theme appears frequently throughout this thesis, and as such, this work has impact in the way in which it models how a researcher can work between two disparate fields – Education and Games Studies – and produce data and analysis that is relevant across the different disciplines at the same time. By synthesising ideas from different fields, this thesis makes claims about the teaching of subject-English as a dynamic field, with opportunities for playful pedagogy as well as ‘serious’ learning.

In order to clearly organise this research, one of the main foci of this project was the development of a novel theoretical framework that accounted for commonly used terms, but refined them for more purposeful use in educational settings. By identifying ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ as ideas that are in casual use in the field of education, but ostensibly have no solid conceptualisations in place (with the exception of in Modern Foreign Languages teaching and the use of ‘immersion’), these terms were then redefined with greater specificity to not only describe observable classroom states, but also to foster discussion as to how teachers might create these states in their classrooms with carefully planned pedagogy. The theory developed during this thesis could be applied and developed for use in both education-focused academic research, and in the field of education generally.

Outside of academia, my thesis research is most applicable to the field of secondary school teaching. Through the practical elements of this project, clear strategies for challenging resistant learners, creative tasks that can develop students’ understanding of Literary texts, and an argument against adhering to restrictive curricula are presented, all of which are relevant to both current teachers and school leaders. Meanwhile, as my research continues to inform my practice as a Lecturer at UCL, it also informs the interactions I have with teaching professionals who study on the two MAs for which I am a tutor. Through these points of contact I am then able to disseminate my work further, potentially influencing the practice of other teachers, both in the UK and internationally.

Acknowledgements

This thesis was largely shaped by the students and staff with whom I worked in East London. Teaching a changing and inadequate curriculum, in challenging conditions, through budget cuts, regularly changing headteachers, and a pandemic, would have been impossible if not for the incredible team of professionals I had in my Faculty and across the school, you have my eternal gratitude. I am also convinced that my time in teaching would have been shorter still if it were not for the students who, though presenting their own unique challenges, were nothing short of inspirational in their resilience and determination to transcend their surroundings. A special thank you, of course, goes to the specific students described in the thesis itself, and the staff who offered logistical support during the research process.

I would also like to offer my profound thanks to my supervisory team – Professor Andrew Burn, who not only supervised my nearly seven years of thesis study, but also my MA dissertation before that, and Dr Bruno de Paula, who stepped up to become my second supervisor, and then again to be my primary. Additionally, I would like to acknowledge Dr Jane Coles, who supervised the early part of my research.

Finally I would like to thank my partner Alex for his endless patience in the face of being with someone simultaneously a teacher and a PhD candidate, my London friends and Northern coven for their endless capacity for distraction and surreal humour, and my wonderful UCL Knowledge Lab colleagues for easing my transition out of the classroom and into academia.

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1. Introduction

As a ‘Newly Qualified Teacher’ (NQT) of English in the academic year 2013-2014, the start of my career overlapped with the beginning of a significant shift in the National Curriculum for England. Under Michael Gove, the then Education Secretary, the curricula across the phases were revised in ways that could euphemistically be called polarising (Garner, 2013; Sylvester, 2024). The curriculum for Key Stage 4 (henceforth KS4) English that I trained under became obsolete, breadth of GCSE Literature text options diminished, the spoken word and Media literacy virtually disappeared as required content, and new parameters were formed for what ‘quality’ teaching in English could look like (Connolly, 2021; Green and Connolly, 2022). Whilst opinions in the press, such as those cited earlier in this paragraph, represented a diversity of stances, my experience of talking with both new and established teachers at the time revealed that the teaching professionals I knew were unhappy with, and concerned about, the changes. Critiques ranged from the ‘white-washing’ of GCSE Literature content, to the removal of the compulsory study of Media at a time when access to digital texts was growing exponentially, to the skills-based approach to GCSE Language killing subject-interest. At the time of writing, a decade later, none of these concerns have been proven wholly unfounded.

When launching the new GCSE English qualifications Gove summarised them in the following way:

The English language GCSE will provide all students with a robust foundation of reading and good written English, and with the language and literary skills which are required for further study and work. It will ensure that students can read fluently and write effectively, and will have 20% of the marks awarded for accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. It will also encourage the study of literature for those who do not take the English literature GCSE, with students reading high-quality texts across a range of genres and periods.

The new English literature GCSE will build on this foundation, and encourage students to read, write and think critically. It will involve students studying a range of intellectually challenging and substantial whole texts in detail including Shakespeare, 19th-century novels, Romantic poetry and other high-quality fiction and drama. The new GCSE will also ensure that all students are examined on some ‘unseen’ texts, encouraging students to read widely and rewarding those that can demonstrate the breadth of their understanding (Gove, 2013).

From these brief descriptions, one can see where the concerns about the Language qualification being focused on skills rather than the development of an appreciation of language come from – the emphasis on ‘spelling, punctuation and grammar,’ and ‘functional’ reading and writing. The focus of the Literature GCSE on 19th-century British Literature and Shakespeare, meanwhile, though entirely worthy, also implies a particular view of what kinds of culture might be seen as ‘valid’ or ‘high status.’

However one is ideologically positioned in regards to these content choices, the real-life consequences of their inception include diminished uptake of the range of English qualifications at A Level and increasing issues with recruiting and retaining professionals qualified to teach in this subject area (NATE, 2019; Martin, 2023). This is the context in which I became a teacher, and these are the Discourses that surrounded my practice at every level, from staffroom, to media reportage, to government. However, what really matters in education, aside from the lived experience of teachers, is, of course, the lived experience of our students. The research that forms this thesis is *framed* by the wider battles for education (in subject-English, but also Media Studies and Drama), but is *about* some students, and some texts, and the interaction between the two.

Shortly after qualifying as a teacher, I commenced an MA in Media, Culture, and Education at UCL-IoE, which cumulated in a dissertation - ‘Playable Character: Constitutive Languages and the Creation of Games’ (2016) – supervised by Professor Andrew Burn. The focus of this dissertation was the making of videogames inspired by the canonical literary text of *Beowulf*, and the research took place in my then school of employment in East London. The research was appropriate for an M-level dissertation, and took its framework from a wider *Playing Beowulf* project that Burn was heading at the time, which will be discussed in more detail at a later point in this thesis, though the MA work functioned as a discrete project in its own right.

Some of the broader findings from this project are explored in Burn's *Literature, Videogames, and Learning*, but are also discussed at various points in his other writing of the past decade (Burn, 2021).

What I found in my MA dissertation research went beyond what I expected to observe. Taking place in an extra-curricular club designed to last a term, students self-selected to participate in game-making workshops, motivated (interviews with them indicated) by a pre-existing love of games and 'geek culture,' as they termed it. Though *Beowulf* is a challenging text that none of the students had encountered before, the students took ownership over it, and attendance to the club was maintained long beyond its projected timeframe. Significantly, the student participants were from different social groupings within the school cohort, and had highly various levels of interest in the academic side of their schooling. Despite this, I witnessed the students form a community, with a shared creative purpose, and all of the group left the project with a developed knowledge of *Beowulf* and experience of writing in different forms, and creating with different modes.

The original MA dissertation was designed to explore the students' game making, particularly, and was not broad enough in scope to discuss the wider observations I made of the experience. Nor was I in a position, during the brief research period, to engage in any deeper reflection as to the driving factors behind the club's surprising degree of success and popularity. With hindsight, it seemed to me that trying to understand *why* the students became so invested with activities surrounding a challenging literary text might be a purposeful direction for further research, and this was the point of genesis for the thesis that follows. Observing the student participants who might more usually be described as 'resistant learners' becoming deeply involved with a literary text via a media intervention was a revelatory moment in my earlier career, as it demonstrated how pedagogy capitalising on digital media,

popular culture intertextuality, and play might, in some instances, be more successful than more traditional forms of teaching.

When describing the way in which the student participants became involved in their reading, making, and sharing, I found myself falling back on two terms: *immersion* and *engagement*. As I assembled my PhD proposal, I was struck by the fact that the use of both is inconsistent and, often, casual, presenting an opportunity for a theoretical development. I also found inconsistencies in how existing literature discussed the ways student self-selected texts might be leveraged to influence how young people are able to access challenging mandatory texts they have to study in school. Various existing conceptualisations of ‘third spaces’ (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996; Gutiérrez, 2008; Potter and McDougall, 2017) hinted at a framework I might develop to explore the overlaps between the texts that students read, watch, and play of their own volition, and the texts the National Curriculum deems appropriate for them to study.

Thus, ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ became central to the work that drives this project. In the first instance, I would need to define them in a manner reflexive of their current usage across various fields, but also in a way that makes them relevant for the English classroom. Once defined, the proposed thesis would need to explore what allows these states to manifest, or inhibits them, again, to make them relevant to those teaching English. Finally, the full realisation of this project would involve an investigation of the potential academic benefits of leveraging student-selected texts and creative work to create immersion and engagement, with a view to the research design cumulating in collecting examples of more academically-standard student writing. Consequently, the Research Questions that carry my MA work through to a full PhD thesis became:

1. *How can ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?*
2. *What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*

3. *How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?*

This line of questioning provides a balance between exploring the reality of classroom teaching in English, and the desire to try and allow students to experience enjoyment in their learning of the subject, contra to the concerns voiced over the National Curriculum above. It also follows a logical structure in terms of proposing a theoretical framework, and then testing it against live classroom experience, as work *with* students should also work *for* students. What this means for the format of this project is that after an initial, and necessarily broad, Literature Review, organised by response to each RQ (Chapter 2), the next step will be to produce a Theory chapter to define a theoretical framework of student experience that explores points of origin around which ideas about ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ can coalesce (Chapter 3). Only then will the Methodology be delineated to test the emerging theoretical terms (Chapter 4).

Conducting this research in my school of employment creates the possibility of managing ethnographic work longitudinally and naturally, without the division between subject and observer that might be seen with visiting researcher. Conversely, it will also demand consistent reflexivity to account for my relationship with the students influencing the analysis of the data. The data reviewed will include that gathered during my original MA dissertation (along with contemporary but unused materials), discussed under the newly refined concepts of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ (Chapters 5 and 6) and new data gathered from a project inspired by *Playing Beowulf*, similarly led by Professor Burn, *Playing Macbeth* (Chapters 7 and 8).

Though again part of a larger research project, the design for my contribution to the *Playing Macbeth* project saw me establish my own Methodology as appropriate to my proposed RQs and to the school context. As such, the work was related to the larger study, but also functioned independently of it. The development of a thesis project out of an MA dissertation necessitated

an increased level of professionalism, as well as a stronger sense of independence of approach. It would be possible to view the *Playing Beowulf* project as a kind of pilot study for my research design for *Playing Macbeth*, but that does not feel an appropriate description for the relationship between the two experiences. Whilst the *Beowulf* project indeed forms the inspiration for the work focusing on *Macbeth*, in terms of approach and structure it is very different. The earlier group took place as a longer-term extra-curricular club – what could be understood as a kind of third space (Potter and McDougall, 2017)-, and involved slightly younger students. This afforded more freedom as it did not affect key exam groups. The *Macbeth* group, as will be described in the Methodology, were an exam group, and the study took place during school hours, and so the negotiation for this time with school leadership very much had to be couched in the language of utility and of the National Curriculum noted above, even though the political stance of this study is very much presented as a challenge to the NC as it stands.

Building on, and evolving, the terms ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ has the potential to bridge some of the tensions between Curriculum expectation and student experience that have given rise to this thesis, in a manner that is hopefully relevant to the lived experience of classroom practitioners, specifically those teaching English. The work delineated in the coming chapters represents a journey, not only of a researcher travelling from PGCE, to MA, to PhD, but also of a secondary school teacher growing from a trainee, to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), to Head of Department, to, finally, now, leaving the profession to commence a lecturing role. In the span of time taken to produce this work, it is my classroom experience with students that provided the purpose to see this writing through to completion, as I wanted to be able to do better for them than provide a bland, didactic experience of subject-English implied by the Curriculum they were educated under. As such, I hope that this writing carries a sense of

optimism for what it is possible to achieve as a teacher, and a tone of respect for the journeys students are willing to undertake when given the opportunity.

If the following writing is to be framed in the terms of the contributions it makes to the field(s) of study, then it can be considered in two ways. Firstly, through the use of videogame design as a means of pedagogy for literature teaching and the teaching of writing. The use of game design leading through into creative writing is a novel approach. Secondly, through the teacher-foregrounding of students' third texts as a means of shifting students' relationships with compulsory study texts. As will be seen in both of the case studies, the intervention of digital media practice improved learning outcomes for the cohorts, and there are points where the learning that occurred through game design and third-textual referencing surpasses the degree of learning that would otherwise have been expected to happen, notably in instances involving resistant learners and students classified as EAL. This evidence represents a significant statement about the power of reintroducing aspects of media teaching back into the English classroom.

2. Literature Review

As outlined in the introduction, the Research Questions underpinning this thesis are as follows:

- 1. How can 'immersion' and 'engagement' be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?*
- 2. What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*
- 3. How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?*

The wording of these RQs implies a number of relevant areas to be addressed in this chapter as, of course, social phenomena of any kind involve a complex overlap of people, objects, spaces, emotions, influences. Inevitably then, analysis of social constructs – education, the identity position of ‘student,’ and Discourses around videogames and gaming in this instance - will require the deployment of ‘multiple bodies of knowledge’ (Jabareen, 2009). The research that this thesis will outline is also guided by its situation as adjacent to two wider research projects: *Playing Beowulf* and *Playing Macbeth* (See, for example, the outcomes from the same projects publishes in (Burn, 2021)). As such, the framing of this work must necessarily echo the influences on and of these broader projects.

In order to approach the first Research Question and explore the existing uses of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’, it is necessary to address conceptualisations of immersion and engagement including the examination of ‘immersion’ as an existing concept linked to language acquisition (Lyster, 2004; Cummins, 2009), and the idea of ‘cultural legitimacy’ (Bourdieu, 1986), which will be approached in the subsection subtitled as RQ1. A more detailed exploration of how these terms are used in the field of Games Studies will follow in the Theory chapter, as part of my efforts to redefine these key terms as specific to this project, though an overview of connected work can be found in the final subsection of this chapter. This will assist in establishing a baseline from which the theoretical work can be raised.

For the second Research Question, dealing with the barriers to immersion and engagement, the location of this research as classroom-based will be used as a starting point. This thesis will explore how videogame design can inform the exploration of literature in the English classroom, and therefore is intrinsically linked to ideas around literacy and communication in both their broadest sense, and specifically pertaining to the skills of reading and writing. As a teacher-researcher I would argue that literacy levels, and the relationships students have to

reading in a school, is likely to be a key indicator in what allows or prevents the states of immersion and engagement, so an exploration of different concepts of ‘literacy’ will be key. The theoretical foundations will therefore include acknowledgement of the areas of ‘multiliteracies’ (The New London Group, 1996), ‘multimodal’ literacy (Jewitt and Kress, 2003), media literacy (Buckingham, 2003; Buckingham and Sefton-Green, 1995; Burn, 2021; Burn and Durrant, 2013; Burn, 2015), which will be overviewed in the subsection named for RQ2, and offer us the opportunity to see how flexible the concept of literacy might be within the bounds of this project. As will be noted in the Methodology chapter, however, there are wider social, cultural, and economic factors that act as push and pull dynamics on the student-participants, and we acknowledge that these aspects of lived experience may come to the fore in the research process, rather than through the literature reviewed. Additionally, though academics in different fields – psychology or neuroscience for example – may approach how immersion and engagement can be evidenced through brain activity or physiological responses, this kind of work falls beyond the scope of this thesis.

Finally, to underpin the third Research Question, and the productive connections that can be found between visual creative work and GCSE-style required writing, I will overview existing literature that deals with classroom creativity, including a reflection on ‘role’ and writing taken from the field of Drama Studies (Barrs, 1987; Coles and Bryer, 2018; Coles, Bryer and Pitfield, 2023; Heathcote, Johnson and O’Neill, 1984), notions of childhood play (Burn and Richards, 2016; Burn, 2021), work on visual grammar (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Bezemer and Kress, 2015), and existing hybrid reality games as educational (de Souza e Silva and Delacruz, 2006), all of which will be addressed in the subsection focusing on RQ3. Additionally, as has been previously signposted, the work of Professor Andrew Burn that is drawn from the *Playing Beowulf* and *Playing Macbeth* projects, in places using data generated by my students, will be referred to throughout the chapters.

Considering the above, we can observe that the areas visited by this Literature Review, and the subsequent Theory chapter, will include the fields/ideas of: Media Studies/Cultural studies, Game Studies, Drama Studies, Bilingual Studies, and theoretical work surrounding the notion of ‘literacy’. At the same time, my own location as a practitioner-researcher – a secondary school teacher – must also be considered in my positionality and how this thesis is framed. This is perhaps reflective of the complex nature of teaching, and the many roles a teacher has to act in.

That a project such as this can arise from multiple theoretical backgrounds is far from without precedence, as Potter and McDougall (Potter and McDougall, 2017) note in their work on theorising the literacies that emerge between digital media, culture, and education, that their research also occurs at the intersection of multiple fields. They developed their ideas about literacies around the notion of *third space* (with reference to (Gutiérrez, 2008; Bhabha, 1994)), which they utilise as a paradigm for exploring points of intersection between multiple influences. In turn, this influences the construction of the Theory chapter of this project, and will furthermore influence the development of the idea of the ‘third text’ in the next chapter.

If we consider ‘third spaces’ as hybrids, where what is physical and what is representational meet (Lefebvre, 1991; Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996), or more generally as a point of intersection or overlap between two different spaces (Potter and McDougall, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2008), then this idea, acts as a useful model for where this thesis sits conceptually: between disciplines and, pedagogically, between the spheres of the national curriculum and the lived [*mediated*] lives of students.

Of course, the number of points of theoretical intersection do not aid the conciseness of this Literature Review, so it will be necessary to provide a broad overview in some places, and

with some areas, such as the treatment of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ in Games Studies, to engage with them directly in other chapters during the deeper work on establishing the parameters of the theoretical terms developed specifically for this thesis. As the main concerns for this project, outlined through the RQs, are the development and application of the ideas of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ how they function as theoretical concepts and pedagogical tools relevant to the teaching of English, how these concepts function in different spaces, and how non-traditional teaching methods - the marriage of a canonical text (Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*) to videogame design (the MissionMaker software) - can help to immerse/engage reluctant learners, this work needs to be theoretically reflective of such hybridity. This thesis will function as (and reflect on the implications of it being) a third space both in terms of its theoretical underpinning, *and* in terms of the work it does in exploring the meeting of digital media and canonical text.

RQ1: How can ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?

As the first Research Question (RQ1) asks, ‘*How can ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?*’ it is necessary to commence by exploring how the terms are already used in educational theory, before the concepts are developed in the Theory chapter.

In education, ‘immersion’ is frequently used casually as a buzzword for, ‘teaching involving some kind of technology’ (Webb, 2012a), or as a general way of describing the state of being really involved in a task or text. I will return to the latter idea at a later point when I

will seek to re-theorise ‘immersion’ for this project, but in regards to its linkage with technology as a teaching tool, it is necessary to acknowledge that ‘immersive technology’ is phrase that does not really mean any one thing. When we encounter the phrase, we have to question if it is being used to refer to VR (virtual reality) technology, or if it simply implies a writer’s awe at the power of screen-based technology to interest children. Stood alone, its significance in this usage is unclear, which is problematic considering how readily it is used to describe classroom tasks or learning.

However, when we explore pedagogical references to immersion in a classroom setting, we find that as a teaching strategy it has a clearly established history as a particular practice in teaching Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), or English as an Additional Language (EAL): in essence, the immersive teaching of MFL involves surrounding the student with the target language, forcing them to learn it as they do not have their first language to retreat into for communicative purposes.

As Cummins notes, immersion is not a simple, single-dimensional concept, it has two usages,

In the first sense, immersion programs are ... forms of bilingual education in which students are “immersed” in a second language ... with the goal of developing proficiency in two languages. First language instruction is typically introduced within a year or two of the start of the program and forms an integral part ... In its second sense, the term “immersion” refers to the immersion of immigrant or minority language children in a classroom environment where instruction is conducted exclusively through their second (or third) language (frequently the dominant language of the society or a global language of wider communication). (Cummins, 2009, p. 161)

In the first model, immersion is an artificial construct of the classroom, whereas in the second, it is a constant reality of a person’s life. The former suggests a desirable outcome, whilst the latter presupposes a necessary one. In the case of the latter, there is the possibility of something unique to a student being lost through the process of immersion as it becomes a process of social survival. In this second sense, full immersion is politically complex, as it

implies an outsider fully assimilating into a new culture, but occurs only through the homogenising their cultures as there is no space for the original language/culture to flourish – it is drowned.

The undercurrent of cultural erasure will require reflexivity as I adapt the idea of immersion for broader pedagogical use. If I am concerned with immersion as a *third space* (as noted in Research Question 3 (RQ3)) between what students feel is relevant to their own lives, and what teachers know is relevant to their students' success in GCSE examinations (a difficult balancing act), then immersion cannot be a state that requires the erasure of the students' own voice. Immersive strategies would hopefully provide the opportunity for dialogue, akin to Potowski's reporting on identity in 'dual immersion,' whereby students from immigrant populations learn (American) English through immersion, and in return inspire second language learning in their peers (Potowski, 2007). In the English Literature version of this dialogue, students would learn the language of Shakespeare, for instance, whilst bringing their own ideas, contexts, and personalities to bear on the classic text.

In terms of the effectiveness of immersion as a strategy, Cummins states, 'Research ... has clearly established bilingual and immersion programs as a legitimate educational option for both majority and minority language students,' (p.161) indicating that there is clear precedence for successful application of immersive strategies in the classroom. However, Cummins has faced criticism for his theoretical stance as he fails to account for status – what Edelsky describes as 'marked' and 'unmarked' languages – in the learning of language, as there is always a political layer to the learning of another language for immigrant populations: immigrant students achieve the target language in immersive classrooms because they have to, whereas students learning a second language are not as successful because they have an element of choice (Edelsky, 2006).

Similarly, for this thesis, the danger is that in prioritising the English of the National Curriculum, the language of students' lived experience becomes marked as 'other' or 'lesser' than the language defined by a set of success criteria produced by the Department for Education. Being immersed in a target language has, however, a proven track record in assisting in the acquisition of that target language, and regardless of one's political stance on the varying statuses of different languages, for students to pass their English GCSEs there are acceptable and unacceptable forms of written expression. The task for the classroom teacher, therefore, has to be to find a balance between the different registers of the student, the aforementioned 'third space,' of amalgamation rather than compromise, similar to what De Paula *et al* sought to achieve with their project on 'Computational Thinking' working in a space between STEM subjects and the Arts and Humanities to engage students in non-standard ways (De Paula et al., 2018).

I use 'engage' casually in the previous paragraph, already hinting at a relationship between immersion and engagement. However, so far in this subsection I have focused solely on 'immersion;' the reason for this is that the use of 'engagement' is even more loosely defined in pedagogical literature. Generally, it is used similarly to 'immersion' to describe a student being deeply involved, for example in previous work attempting to use it to describe how deeper involvement looks in Media classrooms (Thomason and Connolly, 2021). However, it is also nuanced in its use in work aimed at helping teachers improve their practice – as in, how to improve your teaching so that it is 'engaging' (Bryson, 2007; Kearsley and Shneiderman, 1998; Pugh et al., 2017). This offers a significant opportunity for this thesis to offer a 'contribution to knowledge,' as the focus here will be student-focused first.

To conclude this subsection, the question then needs to be raised of how a teacher could adapt foreign language teaching's form of immersion for other subjects, as this thesis seeks to explore how '*... immersion and engagement [can] be redefined for the English classroom, and*

how far ... they [can] be considered as useful pedagogical terms...'. As already noted, a teacher would have to consider how immersion can be achieved without the student sacrificing something unique to their way of thinking, being, and experiencing the world. For example, in any school context, even within individual classrooms, students represent many diverse cultures and language backgrounds, which need to be considered against the English National Curriculum's expectations of 'quality' writing – with resonances of what Bourdieu discusses when he talks about taste and dominant forms of cultural legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1986) - especially when held against the multiplicity of student voices. The content to be learned must be in some way all-encompassing to be properly immersive, it must generate a sense of need or urgency, and the student must connect with the value of it. Within these criteria we can see the point of origin for a re-imagined concept of classroom immersion.

Furthermore, the experience of successful bilingual learners, those who have become 'fluent' in their target language, could lead consideration of how immersion can offer a pathway to different modes of 'fluency' in other facets of life: digital fluency, in this study explored through game design, and fluency in Standard English, in this thesis for students with weak literacy. If immersion is as successful for key groups as Cummins suggests, then as a pedagogical concept (and strategy) it could unlock the language of the NC – for some learners almost as alien as a foreign language – for students facing different kinds of disadvantage.

RQ2: What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?

Stepping back from definitions of 'immersion' and 'engagement,' it is important to note that the main core of this thesis is a concern with language, and how students are able to both access it and transform it. In other words, we are interested in different forms of 'literacy'. Consequently, the research conducted for this study is framed through the acts of 'reading' and

‘writing,’ and how far the definition of these verbs can be stretched to account for different modes, and the affordances of different technologies (Cannon, Potter and Burn, 2018). As the case studies for this project concern the making of videogames, we take a broad view of the modes ‘language’ can take, and what ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ can look like. The pathways to accessing and transforming language will also have to be considered as fluid and multiple (or ‘dynamic’ in the terms of Potter and McDougall (2017)), so the paradigms of ‘Social Literacy’, ‘Multiliteracy’, and ‘Multimodal Literacy’ will be key to forming a theoretical baseline for this project. In addition to this, a broad view of the factors that inhibit or promote literacy, as this is the focus of RQ2, need to be considered.

Literacy is being foregrounded as the key focus here, rather than a definition of ‘subject-English,’ as such, because although the development of English as a regulated subject area (Hodgson and Harris, 2024) or the battles for the subject’s political and philosophical soul (Peim, 2009; Moran and Peim, 1989) are clearly linked to the field(s) of study this thesis deals with, the main interest is not the historicity of the subject, but how teachers can make meaningful classroom interventions within the framework of the existing National Curriculum. The work completed here is not done so with the aspiration of changing the entire NC, it simply presents one way of confronting it from within. Similarly, by focusing on broader variations of ‘literacy’ rather than taking on the established field of ‘Media Literacy,’ it is possible for this work to maintain a focus on interventions occurring within the specific limitations of the NC within English classrooms, rather than addressing Media Literacy needs in a wider sense, which would necessitate a different design for the project.

Before we address the nuances of ‘literacy,’ it is critical to acknowledge that ideas of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ have long been understood to be complex and multifaceted. Writing,

firstly, can be viewed with a focus on its role as a form of communication (Burnett and Merchant, 2013; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2009), in relation to speech (Ong, 1982; Derrida, 1997a), and, since the 1970s, a process that is secondary to the act of reading (Barthes, 1984). Reading, meanwhile, is understood not only as the decoding of some kind of text but, particularly in Literary Studies, as a transaction with a text or as the process by which a text is created (Rosenblatt, 1988; Rosenblatt, 2005; Fish, 1980).

For the purposes of this thesis, broad definitions of ‘reading,’ ‘reader,’ ‘writing,’ and ‘writer’ will be maintained. Reading and writing will be understood as creative processes that can span different modes and text forms, using different semiotic resources, and can be inflected by the individual circumstances of the creator. It is necessary to keep these definitions broad as the texts the students will be ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ in the case studies will also be broad in form, media, and mode.

To define a position from which the term ‘literacy’ will be used in this project, our starting point is the wording produced by the British government around the time of the last major reform of the English National Curriculum (NC) in 2013. In their document ‘Improving literacy in secondary schools: a shared responsibility,’ they state,

[Literacy] is more than the mechanics of reading, writing, speaking and listening. The National Curriculum demands that connections be made between each strand and across subjects, which calls for thought and understanding, for recall, selection and analysis of ideas and information, and for coherent, considered and convincing communication in speech and in writing. (2013)

For the Department for Education (DfE), literacy is, then, a set of skills students attain in order to be ‘successful.’ However, the way their ideas are phrased here are inextricably linked to the educational trajectory that cumulates in the GCSE examinations students sit at ages of fifteen or sixteen: the ‘literacy’ of the NC then appears to be little more than the ability to recall and communicate information. It is the stance of this thesis that ‘literacy’ must have a

wider definition, and encompass the varieties of ‘reading’ and ‘writing’ that students will go on to encounter and negotiate in their lives beyond the classroom, particularly the ‘literacies’ demanded by modern technologies, in order to be a relevant intervention. This depth of conceptualisation can account for literacy being multiple, dynamic, and social (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 2014; Potter and McDougall, 2017). Tying these different literacies back to curriculum English is also a key concern, as noted in RQ3. Furthermore, recognising that the limitations of NC literacy, and NC textual breadth, might also be limiting factors on student immersion and engagement in/with their learning is a tension that directs our reading around RQ2.

There are several established bodies of theory that account for literacy as a complex and multiple term. The New London Group’s conceptualisation of ‘multiliteracies’ is a useful point of consideration (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Cope and Kalantzis, 2009), as is the idea of ‘social literacy,’ (D’Agustino, 2013; Gee, 2014), which also explores language in context, as opposed to the set of skills. These methods of exploring language and literacy underpin all three of the research questions, as they are tied to how students access language, what prevents them from accessing language, and then what they are able to go on and do with language.

Gee particularly has written widely on Social Linguistics and language (as well as on video games). In his *Social Linguistics and Literacies* he argues that literacy is the foundation for cultural acceptance, as suggesting someone does not know how to speak their own natural language ‘correctly’ has implications for how they can integrate (Gee, 2014, p.24). In other words, the possession of ‘literacy’ defines if you are able to fully participate in linguistically constructed society. Furthermore, your sociolinguistic articulacy defines the ways you are *able* to read, that is, to make sense of the texts you encounter in daily life, as well as being a key indicator in how others treat you (RQ2 – factors that inhibit). This is a clear limiting factor on whether a child is able to immerse themselves in texts, or develop wider engagement with

them, and whilst there are elements of Gee's thinking that run parallel to the NC model, the social and contextual dimension sets it apart. As will be seen in the case studies, particularly with the *Beowulf* group, it is the social and contextual factors that offer the greatest transformative potential for the student participants in terms of their more traditionally focused literacy activities.

Implicit in this area of Gee's work is the sense that the social nature of language means that the stakes involved in literacy are far higher than individual students learning to 'read' and 'write'. 'Literacy' skills are fundamental in every aspect of their lives as socialised subjects, and what is more, it is social environments that, in fact, determine their literacy and language use. Elsewhere, however, Gee notes that schools are set up to reward individual knowledge and achievement, rather than naturalistic networked learning, in fact working contrary to how, he argues, humans learn (Gee, 2007b). He highlights the social aspects of literacy, as opposed to the literacy of individual success and usefulness implied in the DfE's conceptualisation, which we will return to in our discussion of the *Beowulf* study, and the social relationships that sustained it.

Similarly, Brown et al argue that, 'Enculturating may, at first, appear to have little to do with learning. But it is, in fact, what people do in learning to speak, read, and write...' (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, p. 5), expressing their belief that becoming a subject of, and subject to, language is what makes you part of a specific culture or wider society. However, though they argue for the link between language and the social, they also acknowledge that schools do not always teach in a way that allows for students to own language in a way that fully prepares them for immediately and confidently taking on a role in the world outside of the classroom. Specifically, the manner in which schools use content – dictionaries, texts, sources, formulae - is different from how such artefacts are used by professionals utilising them for work (RQ2). As a consequence, students use content to pass exams but remain unable to,

in their words, ‘use a domain's conceptual tools in authentic practice.’ Again, this curriculum focus can be seen as a limiting factor on immersion and engagement.

Instead of an artificial process, Brown et al suggest ‘cognitive apprenticeships’ as an alternative to introduce students to ‘authentic’ practices via the means of activity or interaction in a teaching style similar to that which one would experience with a craft apprenticeship (RQ3) (Brown et al., 1989). Sellers and Souter similarly, and much later, argue for education’s need to move beyond a focus on knowledge acquisition and towards ‘insight and adaptation of our learning tools...’ (Sellers & Souter, 2012, p. 22). These are concerns the game design element of this project can help to address, as whether the aspects of ‘Computational Thinking’ that game design fosters (De Paula et al., 2018), or the academic gains of ‘playing’ or ‘gaming’ a traditional text (Burn and Durran, 2013; Burn, 2021; Carr et al., 2006) are what are weighed, the process of game design involves students learning to adapt (RQ3 – third spaces). By foregrounding the audience for communication, in this case the student-participants’ peer groups, the conditions for immersion/engagement are created by leveraging the social foundations of language (RQ2).

Street, meanwhile, also emphasises literacy as social practice, not just a set of skills, which I would argue carries over into the idea of (media) literacy involving the capacity to create, critique, but also to contextualise. He contributes to the argument that ‘literacy’ is multiple and dependant on context, which can situate literacy as a form of interaction, rather than a functionality, something which the English National Curriculum fails to account for (Street, 2001; Street and Leung, 2010; Street, 2014). Similarly, Burnett and Merchant also argue for the multiplicity and sociality of literacy. The conclusions they reach on the chaotic experience is that the various experience of the children involved ‘...helps us recognise and interrogate multiplicity and consider how different interests intersect during meaning-making through and around texts,’ which informs our reading of the case studies within this project,

and relates to our understanding of third spaces and third texts (Burnett & Merchant, 2013, np.; Potter & McDougall, 2017; Cannon, Potter & Burn, 2018). The enabling capacity of literacy-as-social-practice additionally assists in helping to create the conditions for immersion and engagement (RQ2).

A further key concept to assist in framing literacy in schools is that of ‘multiliteracies.’ In order to account for both the differing channels of communication and the diversity of voices seeking to communicate, Cope and Kalantzis, and the New London Group, use the idea of ‘multiliteracies’ to express the complexity children encounter when trying to become literate in the modern world, and the challenges schools face in order to adequately prepare them for it (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). If the purpose of the National Curriculum in England is to create a level playing field in terms of education generally, and literacy specifically, then it could be argued that, in failing to account for multiliteracy (especially digital media literacies) schools are forced to work against what the NC’s stated aims actually are (RQ2 – inhibiting factors). In removing ‘Media’ study from the English curriculum in favour of more ‘challenging’ content (that is, nineteenth century British novels), students are then left without a broad range of literacies from which to draw, leaving them without key life- and employability skills, as well as leaving them resistant to the study of literature (Connolly, 2021; Green and Connolly, 2022).

In defining multiliteracies, Cope and Kalantzis admit, ‘We were interested in the growing significance of two “multi” dimensions of “literacies” in the plural—the multilingual and the multimodal,’ and while they pursued the literacy angle, many other theorists had already developed clear ideas around multimodality (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, np.; Bezemer & Kress, 2015; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Kress & Leeuwen, 2001). Furthermore, discussing the modern learning environment, Leander and Lewis argue that, ‘Although literacy has always

been multimodal, contemporary literacy practices rely on an increasingly complex range of modalities...’ (Leander & Lewis, 2008, np.). In other words, even though digital forms of literacy are not explicitly taught in most classrooms, the technologies filter in through common teaching practice (RQ3 – third spaces). However, this is an assumption, rather than a reality as it depends on individual teachers, rather than curriculum content. There is also seems to be a baseline assumption that students will have the same experience of, and access to, technologies (RQ2 – inhibiting factors) (Mertala and Salomaa, 2020).

As well as the social aspect of literacy, it can be argued that the variety of access students have to different kinds semiotic resource affects how they are able to create meaning, which could affect how well different students will respond to videogame design as a method for exploring literary texts, and also how well they are able to immerse/engage. Bezemer and Kress have explored the different facets of multimodal learning at length and suggest that, in communicating, every ‘signmaker’ is assembling a message about the things in the world around them that they have noticed and wish to transmit. They state, ‘... every sign and sign complex tells us something about how a signmaker knows and sees the world at the time of the production of the sign.’ Indicating that modes always appear in combination, and therefore should not be perceived in terms of hierarchy (Bezemer & Kress, 2015, p. 41; Bezemer, 2020). Here we also observe where multimodal theory overlaps with ideas of literacy as social: however signs are assembled, they exist in a community. The textual resources available to students can influence how they engage or do not engage with work (RQ2 – inhibiting factors), and what resource they have to pull from where their work is framed with strategies like game design (RQ3 – third spaces). Even though the theorists noted above do not specifically discuss game design, their theoretical perspectives help connect creative work with ‘traditional’ models of literacy, and as such are a valuable point of consideration. Meanwhile, there are scholars

working along similar lines and actively engaging with ‘new’ media and games, and game literacy, which roots this thesis in an established trajectory (Beavis and O’Mara, 2010; Apperley and Beavis, 2013; Green and Beavis, 2013; Bacalja, 2020).

Framing multimodality in this way, alongside multiliteracy and social models of literacy, is deliberate in order to maintain a broad sense of what literacy can be understood as, and therefore help us to consider the possibilities for creating a wide set of conditions for immersion and engagement (RQ2). Additionally, as will be noted in the Methodology, Social Semiotics will be drawn on in the analytic chapters as a framework for unpacking the way the student-participants assemble signs and attempt to make meaning.

The privileging of literacy in its written mode is sometimes viewed as unrepresentative of the modes dominant in the wider world, which is certainly the case for students whose cultural experiences are ‘othered.’ For Jewitt, ‘...image is on the ascent. When writing does dominate the screen I think it can be seen as a kind of resistance to the multimodal potential of the computer screen.’ She argues that a lot of writing appearing on a screen suggests traditionalism and references ideas of authority or professionalism, though her argument does not account for games using text in a manner that is playful, or the fact that having written instructions alongside what is visual or verbal allows for people with a potentially wide range of access needs to be able to play a game equally (Jewitt, 2008, np., 108; Jewitt & Kress, 2003; Jewitt, 2013).

Whilst the ‘ascent of the image’ may appear to be the case, this inflection of the multiplicity of literacy does not fully account for young people needing to navigate written texts in order to play a successful role in wider professional life, nor does it allow for the unavoidable text-based examinations, highlighting the tension between the NC and lived experience once more (RQ2). In popular culture, certainly, images are prevalent, but in formal

examinations and a lot of forms of employment, writing is still what ‘counts’. The lack of media diversity within the National Curriculum, however, could be seen as actively disadvantaging students in their preparation for life in workspaces that rely on technology, feeding into a digital economy. Furthermore, if textual and media hybridity is a characteristic of the age we are living and working in, then there seems to be little reason for excluding visual forms in the pursuit of the ‘functional’ idea of literacy noted in the NC development document. This is arguably an ‘easy win’ for both student outcomes and student immersion/engagement (RQ2).

Before moving onto discussing the grammars and modalities of videogames in the next subsection to address RQ3, it is worth first acknowledging that the shifts between analogue and digital media, and the debates that surround these technological developments, echo discussion of evolutions between different cultures of communication, and the disjuncture between the NC and the lived experience of students.

To link the analogue/digital shift to a theorist also concerned with language, we can observe that when Walter Ong initiates his ideas of primary and secondary orality, he highlights some interesting idiosyncrasies of contemporary technological cultures (Ong, 1971; Ong, 1975; Ong, 1982). In preliterate cultures, he notes, orality is a necessity, and methods of communication are developed to communicate ideas and aid memory in the absence of a formal written language. The new orality of communication arises from both a social urge and the availability of technology, with new technologies allowing us to enter into a ‘new world of sound’. In other words, forms of communication are looking backwards as well as forwards, for example as we see in the use of text in video games.

In Ong’s ‘new world of sound,’ he casually uses the idea of immersion to describe a state technology makes available to us, suggesting that, ‘Total immersion in electronic sounds

becomes an ideal and frequent achievement in electronic music played with a volume which makes conversation at the top of one's voice inaudible...' (Ong, 1971 p. 295) In this point, he suggests that immersion in sound, though not universally desirable, is an increasingly common state to achieve or seek for. The orality in this example is more complex than simple communication, as it takes on an ontological significance. To be human is to find connections, but technology permits those connections to be trace, in a recording of a voice, in the Derridean sense, which we will address in the next chapter. We connect with a space (recording) where a person was, but is no longer: an overwritten presence.

Ong's work tends to view oral communication in a positive light, but due to the time period in which it was written he could not possibly have foreseen how young people would go on to use social media as a primary form of communication, with messaging services allowing for a truly multimodal blend of text, photograph, video, meme, GIF, and emoji. What remains the same is the call and response nature of communication, though what emerges through this project's case studies is the fact that students' multimodal communications often appeal to communities bound together, if not by a clearly defined subculture, then by a shared set of cross-referenced media 'texts'. Sound, as will be explored in the analytical chapters, also roots the students' experiences in orality.

For Ong, the 'intersubjective' nature of communication operates on a different plane to the intertextual possibilities of mediated (specifically written) communication, as text is always already an assemblage, and can be accessed at temporality remote from its creation. Direct human communication in literate societies draws on literate formulations in its structures, but evolves in real-time with the feedback of a second subject. As the RQs underpinning this project are concerned with the ideas of immersion and engagement, however, we necessarily have to consider layers of presence and immediacy in a depth that Ong does not (Lombard and

Ditton, 1997). We need to consider the boundaries of presence and mediation, even if these concepts do not become central to our reconceptualization of immersion and engagement.

The distance between signal and receiver, technology and subject, has been explored in depth by other theorists more explicitly concerned with technology and digital media (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, 4-5; Levine & McLuhan, 1964; Manovich, 2013) but the idea of variations of literacy rewiring the ways in which we formulate communication, and therefore presumably formulate thought, can be seen as particularly interesting for this project's exploration of game authoring as a way into exploring literature and creative writing. This position is especially interesting in the light of the perennial fears around technological change causing young people to 'dumb down.' As the previous review of conceptions of Multiliteracies above have shown, however, one form of technological literacies does not necessarily overwrite the other: they coexist, and function expansively in a manner that is inclusive of the experience of immersion and engagement (RQ2).

The transformation of digital grammars into new media - chirographic, typographic, *or* oral - can be seen as an act of engagement, in its casual sense, as the subject transmitting their message is applying their self-gained knowledge of a particular field as a demonstration of a mastery they have achieved through applied effort, as opposed to the languages and grammars gained through their more formal process of education. This move is real-world relevant but non-assessable in terms of the English National Curriculum, implying the kind of barrier noted in RQ2 (inhibiting factors), as we can see students' lived experienced rendered as invalid. This alienating experience is something this thesis seeks to work though, not with a 'cure all' advance in pedagogy, but with the development of conceptualising 'immersion' and 'engagement' as a framework for more intentional ways of connecting the texts students know, to the ones they *have* to know (RQ1 – definition of terms).

There are pedagogical moves that can be made to capitalise on the engagement of young people with the grammars of the internet, of social media, of code, that can feed back into the National Curriculum that alienates and devalues them, without taking a naïve ‘digital natives’ stance on the skills students have already gained outside of the classroom (Prensky, 2001). Working on the creations of games linked to canonical literary texts, this project will argue, is one way of achieving this.

RQ3: How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?

The thinking outlined in the subsection above begins to build the case for game design as a relevant tool for the English classroom, via the route of multiliteracy and multimodality. Adopting the approach of a multiliteracies framework, appears to be significant in preparing students for the multiple literacies of the world outside the classroom, which means we need an understanding of visual grammars as much as we need fluency in the written and spoken grammar of language, whether this is acknowledged by the National Curriculum or not. If there is a deficit in the content of the NC, then it falls to teachers and Heads of Departments within schools to find ways of introducing multiliteracies back into the classroom, and to find ways of leveraging students’ own lived experiences as a way to navigate the limited proscribed content of study the curriculum demands. This is, as stated in the introduction, one of the driving forces behind the work contained in this thesis, completed, as it was, during my time as a classroom practitioner.

If we are consider the ‘digital age’ as one of textual hybridity, it is important to acknowledge visual forms, but it is also important to recognise that there is no reason to assume that visual texts have to be static. As already noted above, Burn and Parker offer the opportunity

for us to translate the concept of ‘grammar’ between visual and literary forms, tracing a scholarly lineage from Halliday via Kress and van Leeuwen (Burn and Parker, 2003; Burn, 2021; Kress, 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Similarly, and relevant directly to the case studies for this thesis is the work done on ‘game literacy’ (Apperley and Beavis, 2013). For this project specifically, understanding and exploring the multimodal nature of games will be vital, as the overlaps between game design, oracy, and the written word is fundamental to the overall aims of what I wish to explore (RQ3- third spaces and creativity).

Before examining game-specific theory briefly here, and in more depth in the following chapter, it is also important to note how ‘immersive’ strategies, though not named as such, have already influenced pedagogy, specifically, but not exclusively, through the use of Drama in the English classroom. I introduce Drama and ‘role’ here for the potential overlap they offer for informing RQ3 (third spaces and creativity) and creative strategies for teaching Literature. Though the case studies for this project involve videogame design, the use of scripting, avatars, and potentially voice means that game design inhabits spaces, particularly in terms of educational research, previously occupied by Drama, though this is not the first time and overlap between Drama and Game Studies has been proposed (Carroll and Cameron, 2005; Coles and Bryer, 2018).

Historically, through Vygotsky, we have to acknowledge the role of play in the development of children generally (Vygotsky, 1933; Daniels, 2001). However, considering Drama as something significantly more than a form of simple ‘play’, we meet the idea of ‘inhabiting’ or claiming ‘ownership’ over a text. This pedagogical move has long been shown to be highly successful for engaging students with literature (Coles et al., 2023). ‘Ownership’ of a text has the potential for a highly developed understanding of a difficult literary texts, as students navigate the story as if they are within it, and Dramatic action allows for children to

become part of a text by externalising the narrative. ‘Role’ is a very active form of ‘engagement’ (in its casual usage) as students are physically involved in making and remaking a narrative. Through performing, students are active participants, and their involvement is clearly visible during the process, though there is much debate as to what extent they are ‘remaking’ the narrative, as opposed to performing a preestablished role as one would in a dramatic piece (Carroll, 2002). The performance of text could, arguably, be seen as a strategy for overcoming the barriers some students face when failing to become immersed in, or engaged with, a literary text, as they inhabit the story without being caught up on the challenge of the language (RQ2 – inhibiting factors). Additionally, the word ‘play’ (in English at least) is useful to foreground, as we find overlap between what it is to play a game and what it is to perform a play (Fernández-Vara, 2009).

The question of what reading (and performing) are, and the true level of creativity involved, is a challenging one with a broad theoretical Discourse. Considering texts as received versus texts as re-made, historically Barthes’ conceptualisation of ‘readerly’ and ‘writerly’ texts in *S/Z* explored how some texts demand more than a passive audience, which seems a particularly applicable idea here as dramatic texts are naturally ‘readerly’ (Barthes, 1991). Similarly, Rosenblatt formulates her ideas of ‘aesthetic’ or ‘efferent’ reading, in a discussion of what we do when we read, and what we do with textual information (Rosenblatt, 1988). In an even more interactive mode, Barrs explored how assuming a role in relation to a text can help situate one in relation to it, whilst more recently Brady, and Coles and Bryer, have looked at how dramatic or visual strategies for exploring a text can build a student’s relationship to it (Barrs, 1987; Brady, 2014; Coles and Bryer, 2018; Coles et al., 2023). The idea of a student being situated within a text, in dramatic action by performing the text in a physical space, can, I would argue, be transformed with the idea of video games, and videogame-making, by

transposing the physical action into digital space, making it, in effect, a form of ‘third space’ that is a site of potential creative productiveness (RQ3) (Potter and McDougall, 2017).

Theorists such as Dorothy Heathcote had already made the case for the power of Drama in the English classroom (Heathcote et al., 1984; Johnson, 2008; O’Neill, 2014), following Vygotsky’s critical lineage, examining how learning is both mediated through symbols and consolidated through the social aspect of learning. She suggested that, in Drama, when someone is given a role to fill they become more deeply involved in a task or activity, suggesting a line of enquiry through Games Studies, as it could be argued that assuming an avatar is in some ways similar to stepping into role (Anderson, Carroll and Cameron, 2009; Flintoff, 2010). More deeply, she suggests that the deep involvement generated by work in role encourages participants to ‘care,’ which could be an important consideration later when ‘engagement’ is reconsidered as a concept (RQ1 - definitions).

In some ways, however, Heathcote’s passion for the power of Drama has to be tempered by the reality of the English classroom, and the overwhelming bias towards GCSE-style activity, limiting the space for ‘play,’ the further through school a student progresses. The same is true of all creative practice, as the focus on examinations leads to a highly transactional model of education in English schools. Influenced by the work of Freire, via Boal, Campbell raises the concern that, ‘... the idea of theatre as a universal language through which young people can be empowered to explore and express their own experience remains a controversial one in Britain...’ as, from educational ‘reform’ in the 1980s, education has been politicised to the extent where it resembles ‘mere training’ rather than something powerful and transformative (Campbell, 1994, p.54; Boal, 1993; Freire, 1996).

However, and more positively, the twin ideas of engagement and transformation have already been explored by O’Neill and Rogers, in a manner that suggests students’ responses in work are linked to their active involvement in a text (O’Neill and Rogers, 1994). In other words,

in the act of engagement - for O'Neill and Rogers the 'prying open' of text - students themselves become producers of meaning and, in terms of drama, direct involvement gives students a voice so they are able to become creators themselves. This sense of creation has therefore already been shown to be able to feed back into written work in the English classroom, which implies that developing a sense of immersion in text through alternative, creative tasks has successful precedents (O'Neill and Rogers, 1994). As there exist prior studies of how Drama and role can feed into the kind of writing considered useful for success in GCSE-style writing (RQ3), this potentially legitimates wider use of game design as a teaching strategy, if there is also careful consideration of the different modes of game design and how they link more concretely to ideas of literacy. The idea of role and performance is also explored by Carroll, however, he extends his discussion further into digital spaces, specifically game design, taking the idea of role across different modes (Carroll, 2002).

The overlap between Drama and Game Studies represented by the idea of 'play' implies a possible strand of redefinition for the terms 'immersion' and 'engagement' (RQ1 - definitions) as well as the precedence of successful Drama interventions in pedagogy mapping onto the videogame making in this thesis (RQ3 - creativity). Of course, the activities of game-making, and the elements of Drama, are discussed within this project as strategies that lead back to the 'traditional' and 'academic' English classroom activity of writing, so we now move onto explore the literacies of this space, in order to map out how points of intersection between the English classroom and game-making might be beneficial for students (RQ3).

The way young people find their own spaces and language within popular culture is termed 'poaching' by Jenkins, which he acknowledges as an oppositional act against 'official' or 'high' status voices. Fans, 'Unimpressed by institutional authority and expertise [...] assert their own right to form interpretations, to offer evaluations, and to construct cultural canons.'

(18) And so, communicate via modal assemblages of second-hand data. In some ways this works to describe what occurs when students are tasked with using MissionMaker to make games from a prescribed text (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins et al., 2006). The way this thesis project will work is through allowing clashing grammars, forms of literacy, and varying modes to coexist, demonstrating to students varying means of communication, and empowering them to use them in different modes and situations (RQ3 – third spaces).

As well as the process containing shades of ‘poaching,’ it can also be understood through the lens of Bolter and Grusin’s work on ‘remediation,’ as for them, ‘... all mediation is remediation...’ so we can consider the process as game making as always-already an act of repetition and bricolage (Bolter & Grusin, 1999, 5). The varying modes assembled into digital media broadly, and computer games specifically, are backwards-referential, which offers a degree of reassurance for students as they have existing communicative frameworks to build on. Both the ideas of poaching and remediation situate students in the middle of the creative process, meaning that what they create is valid and worthy as they are simply evolving ideas that preceded them (RQ3).

Additionally, as Burn and Duran have argued, there is a kind of safety in digital creation as, ‘The digital medium makes possible a specific kind of learning. Any moment in the process is always provisional...’ (Burn & Durran, 2007, 5). What this means is decisions are less final, and therefore students do not have to feel as if everything they are experimenting with is subject to critique or judgement, in opposition to their experience of GCSE-style writing. This could be one fact that fosters a sense of immersion in game design (RQ1 - definitions). It also reinforces the fact that a digital space is one where the grammars can be learnt – allowing on to become literate and then fluent – without the threat of failure (RQ2 – inhibiting factors). Furthermore, as Burn later notes, schools are ‘defiantly’ multimodal in their output, so there is precedent for the kind of third space creativity offered by game design (Burn, 2021).

As noted earlier, there exists a body of literature pertaining to the use of games in education, often inflected towards coding or playing games to acquire content, but very little regarding the *making* of games in an educational setting, particularly in relation to the teaching of English literature. This is not particularly surprising as games may be viewed as frivolous on the one hand, or conversely might be avoided if a teacher is not comfortable with technology on the other. Furthermore, it is important to note that learning through games does not work for all students, which also explains reticence towards their use (Turner et al., 2018). Additionally, it is necessary to recognise that ‘games’ is a very broad term, covering everything from a way in which children in early stages of development learn, to multiple genres of commercial videogames (Plass, Homer and Kinzer, 2015). What we do know, as previously mentioned, is that play is an important part in the development of children as they mature towards independent adult life, so activities constituting cognitive apprenticeships, as game has the potential to do for functional digital fluency, follow an established pedagogical lineage (Vygotsky, 1933). To acknowledge the issues with both the term ‘games’ and the idea of using them in a formal classroom setting, it will be necessary for the design of the case studies to root this project in ‘observable’ outcomes in terms of GCSE-style writing (RQ3).

Gee is also a powerful voice to invoke here once more, as his work spans considerations of literacy as social (as noted above), as well as writing directly on videogames, therefore covering some of the key areas of focus for this project. For Gee, ‘Video gaming is a new “literacy,” and by “literacy” we can understand that he means in any technology that allows people to “decode” meaning and produce meanings by using symbols,’ making his positive stance very clear as he aligns this form of play with the key literacy skill of ‘decoding’ (Gee, 2007a). He goes on to suggest that each form of literacy involves relationships between ‘consumption (reading) and production (writing).’ In the case of video game means we can argue the ‘consumption’ is *play*, framing the technology as active, and a useful way of securing

student attention. ‘Securing student attention’ is not enough, however, to justify the use of videogame making with ‘high stakes’ GCSE classes, so again, the methodology for this project will have to account for how the process of game making can be demonstrably linked to more conventional classroom outcomes (RQ3).

Similarly to Gee, Burn notes, ‘Narratives usually make statements; in games, however, they also ask you questions and make you do things.’ Casting game narrative as active in and of itself (Burn, 2009). This shift towards activity gives the author of a game a new, at least perceived, level of control over the audience: the shift from the declarative to the interrogative and imperative modes suggests a degree of participation on the part of the audience that goes beyond that experienced in print media, and can be linked to key skills required for students to succeed in their GCSE English Language papers. However, discussing play in contrast to narrative strays into the narratology versus ludology debates that historically caused conflict in Games Studies, and falls broadly outside of the scope for this thesis. What is interesting for us here, though is how the differing levels of narrative construction available to the game designer offer a level of engagement that students may find unfamiliar and therefore intriguing (RQ1, RQ3). This project will ask students to situate themselves as both game author and game player, mapping onto their locations as readers and writers of texts.

Burn goes on to argue that, ‘The distinction between author and audience is at least partially dissolved by digital interrogation, appropriation and transformation. The audience is out of its seats.’ (Burn, 2009) So, as well as an interrogative narrative and a new literacy to negotiate, games make a ‘writer’ of the ‘reader’ as the player almost ‘writes’ the game as they make decisions in their play. This idea is echoed by Mackey as she argues, ‘The stance and expectations of the print reader play a significant role in how a written story is understood... The open-ended nature of a digital game may mean that the stance of the player may contribute even more significantly to how the game is put together...’ (Mackey, 2006, 42). The idea of

the active role of the gamer is more nuanced here, as the implication is that the desires of gamers are anticipated by game designers, in order to make their games more marketable, so their influence on a game is felt before it is even fully realised. This line of thinking will inform how the idea of game making is introduced to the students taking part in my study, as a perceived audience will assist in their own designs (RQ3 – third spaces). Mackey has also explored the tacit understanding of narrative that can be traced across film, books, and videogames, in a way that suggests the power of narrative to engage cannot be understated (Mackey, 2014). Burn, meanwhile, argues that Literature has *always* been multimodal, which implies that Mackey is suggesting a distinction that is not necessarily a valid one (Burn, 2021).

If we do consider games as a unique media form, then we have to acknowledge the uniqueness of how they are ‘read.’ Though the psychological and neuroscientific aspects of immersion and engagement are beyond the limits of this project, it is simultaneously impossible for us to fail to acknowledge how the design of games is a process of inviting the engagement of others with a narrative and process of play that you have constructed. As, ‘... the characteristic of video games that most conspicuously distinguishes their ability to promote presence from the ability of other entertainment technology is their capacity for interactivity.’ (Tamborini & Bowman, 2010, p.87) then the mechanics of how to engage a perceived audience will be the next consideration for student game makers, and this structuring of ‘things to think about,’ will need to inform the way in which the process is designed and structured for the students (RQ1, RQ3). Beyond the practical considerations of engagement and audience, the students in this study will also have to construct their own narratives out of details from *Beowulf* or *Macbeth*’s existing structure. The twin ideas of immersion and engagement explored in the next chapter will consider interactivity and embodied experience in more detail.

As will be seen in the case studies, however, immersion and engagement can span both the playing and making of games, so regarding making rather than playing, Jensen describes videogame making as a form of ‘metaphorical world-making,’ suggesting something very interesting about how games work as a form of communication (Jensen, 2012), which can also be linked to more traditional story-telling (RQ3). Metaphors in written and spoken language are used to create an image of something the creator is using comparison to communicate. Sometimes a metaphor can make the unfamiliar comprehensible to an audience, or sometimes it can seek to make the familiar strange. Either way, the concept of metaphor is one that bridges the gap between game design and textual narrative creation. It is hoped that in the use of play, or apprenticeship, through game design that students will grasp the concept of metaphor and then be able to apply it to written work of their own. The transformation back from game to text is a fundamental step in this thesis. In fact, it is important overall for this project to view games as more than, ‘...deep technologies for recruiting learning as a form of profound pleasure...’ (Gee, 2007b, p.5). Practising classroom teachers, will not utilise a teaching strategy just because it is enjoyable: in the long term, it also needs to be effective (RQ3 - creativity). For this reason, the main drive of the thesis is not the making of the games themselves, but the benefits of doing so.

Taking game design as a starting point, if we are to argue that multimodal, intertextual resources allow for students to more clearly understand and ‘read’ texts, then, it follows that the ‘writing’ of texts should demonstrate increased understanding, or the process that occurs for students to take the steps necessary to understand a text. Burn argues that, ‘Making is primarily about representation...’ and explores, through different media/textual forms, what it is possible for ‘making’, ‘representation,’ to be (Burn, 2009). ‘Representation’ as an act is clearly not limited to any particular mode or media, varying depending on the person-who-is-communicating’s context and available resources, so we can argue that there will always be

the opportunity for multimodality in student creative work, particularly in game design where there is a natural call for visual, sound, and textual choices to be made (Burn, 2021).

The experiences people have with games has, as mentioned previously in this chapter, generated discussion over the ‘ludic’ and ‘narrative’ aspects of games and gameplay. The field of Games Studies has historically harboured strong disagreement over the relative importance of the ludic and narrative aspects of gaming, Juul, for example analysing games as ludic, versus Ryan and Wesp foregrounding their narrative elements (Juul, 2010; Wesp, 2014; Ryan, 2002). Other strands in the field that bear noting are the nature of digital texts in and of themselves (Aarseth, 1997), and how digital media can be used for repurposing and disseminating texts (Jenkins, 1992; Murray, 1997a; Johnson, 2008; Bolter and Grusin, 1999). This area of theory initially seems only to be peripheral to a project focusing on game making in the English classroom. However, analysis of the multimodal constructions of student-made games will require a constant reflexive acknowledgement of their difference, and of their positionality as forms of third space learning.

Concluding Thoughts

It is, unfortunately, necessary to end this chapter with a caveat regarding the wider practicalities of utilising digital creative forms in a school setting. As Collins and Halverson have argued, ‘[A] close look at the intersection of educational practice and digital technology suggests tensions rather than transformations,’ which, though from a piece more than ten years old, is still reflective of the classroom situation today (Collins and Halverson, 2010). This argument is echoed by Crook, who suggests that, ‘we are living in a time of participatory tools, participatory attitudes and participatory aspirations; yet educational practice does not seem to be easily bringing these elements into an expected alignment.’ (Crook, 2012). In short, however much evidence there is for the power games, game making, and other digital media have in the

classroom, the National Curriculum that determines what is studied has limited recognition of them. In response to this, the design of this project consciously links the production of games back to elements of the formal NC, acknowledging the different areas of theory outlined above.

As one of the purposes of this project is to develop and redefine the concepts of immersion and engagement for the English classroom (RQ1), the perspectives explored in this chapter demonstrate both how these terms are already used, but also how they lack specificity. Meanwhile the theory exploring literacy underscores some of the barriers students may face with immersion and engagement, as they pertain to text. Finally, the work on multimodality and Game Studies outlined in this chapter hint at how game making and other visual or dramatic strategies might be used in a way that is ‘useful’ for students following the course of GCSE English Language and Literature.

Furthermore, the variety of fields encompassed within this review of existing, connected literature highlights how multidisciplinary the work of this thesis is. The nature of immersion, as it is already understood in education, the uses of drama and role, the fields of social literacy, Multiliteracy, and Multimodal Literacy, and the arguments of game literacy and Games Studies are all fundamental in underpinning the work proposed by this thesis. In essence, these theoretical spaces reflect the multifaceted reality of education, which it is important to represent during the research process, as work done by a teacher-researcher will always already be situated in a space that is not neat and theoretical – classrooms, the education of students, and the processes of teaching are complex. As such, working around as well as with the NC is vital to the preservation of subject English (and subject-Media Studies), as they cannot and should not be reduced to a set of employability skills. Adopting a student-centric approach to education, that accounts for both children and their contexts is a profoundly important move for educators to make.

3. Theory

Framing and Repurposing Established Paradigms

The research questions for this thesis indicate the work herein will include a redefinition of the terms ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ and explanation of why this is a necessary move is simple. Firstly, the terms are already used across the different spheres explored in the Literature Review, but in different, casual, ways, so for their use in this project to be meaningful, their multiplicity must be narrowed down to a singular, coherent meaning, dividing their casual use from their potential for scholarly application. Secondly, the concept of ‘immersion’ is contested in almost every field it is already used in, and engagement does not fare much better. Consequently, there is further impetus to rework the terms so they can be considered credible tools of enquiry.

However, before we can settle on a definition of the key concepts for this thesis, it is necessary to explore the philosophical paradigms that will be used to underpin any retheorisation, as well as to examine how the terms are used currently. Unusually, perhaps, for a chapter that seeks to provide clarity of definition, we will take Deconstruction as our framework, with a particular focus on the philosophical trajectory of Jacques Derrida.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s introduction to Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* opens in the following manner:

“Humankind’s common desire is for a stable centre, and for the assurance of mastery – through knowing or possessing. And a book, with its ponderable shape and its beginning, middle, and end, stands to satisfy that desire ... Ferdinand de Saussure had remarked that the ‘same’ phoneme pronounced twice or by two different people is not identical with itself... So do the two readings of the ‘same’ book show an identity that can only be defined as a difference.”
(Derrida, 1997b, xi)

Here, with the spirit of Deconstruction, she focuses on the unresolved tensions in texts (and books-as-objects), which she uses to present a microcosm of Derrida's wider philosophical project of challenging the dualisms of Western Metaphysics. However, this foregrounding of difference creates an apparently irresolvable problematic, – an aporia – which, for our exploration of KS4 student experiences, must be understood as both a challenge and an opportunity. If there is no commonality in experience, then we have to query how any sense of (textual) comprehension arises at all. At the same time, though, the lack of an overarching position suggests that there is always already a gap in texts for a new reader to situate themselves in, meaning that the experience of that text will always be uniquely personal and consuming. There is also hope in the suggestion that people crave a stability of text, as that implies that anyone, in the right conditions could be motivated to find an immersed or engaged relationship with a narrative or textual form.

Deconstruction, loosely adopted, affords us an opportunity to dig into the relationship between student and text, and, as I will argue, can be used to explore how students become immersed or engaged with what they are studying. Deconstruction's foregrounding of a sense of play (in-between, and in rebellion against, structures) resonates with the philosophical Discourse of the 1980-90s – in her study of 'Literary Games,' Astrid Ensslin mentions Derrida in the same space as Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque' and Levi-Strauss' 'bricolage', noting their common usefulness as paradigms (Ensslin, 2014; Bakhtin and Pomorska, 1971; Lévi-Strauss, 1966) – and in this commonality we can see a possible application of Deconstruction to classroom life: to unpick the way in which students blend their experiences with their school's expectations in order to navigate their experiences, 'playing' within, around, and against structures that lack concrete boundaries.

Notably, though, Ensslin diverges from my line of argument as she suggests that people read and experience literary texts in the same way, compared to how players/users of games

experience variance from the same coded starting point. This is in contradiction to Spivak's argument above, and suggests a point of caution in our use of Deconstruction, as Ensslin discusses Derrida before making a point that is in opposition to my reading of his wider thesis here. There is specific evidence from Derrida's wider oeuvre, however, to indicate that he views no meaning as fixed, or without elision, and therefore Deconstruction remains a significant tool for us to use in exploring student experience *and* in helping us to reconceptualise the concepts of immersion and engagement, if taken in this spirit. The aforementioned division in the experience of consumption of literary and ludic works, also fails under the paradigm of Deconstructive thought, which can approach the historic Games Studies division of narratology and ludology from the somewhat different angle.

If we seek to explore how students experience immersion and/or engagement (as will be defined shortly) in relation to texts, then it is natural to ask how we achieve this from a standpoint of inherent alienation, as Spivak's reading of Saussure implies. It is also necessary to explore how it could be possible for students to be alienated from texts, whilst additionally finding themselves inside the same texts from which they are divided. We need to map how, though Subject, language, and text are founded on differe(a)nce, communication - the finding of points of linguistic commonality - is still possible. Of course, this abstract line of thought will lead to a more anchored development of the concepts of immersion and engagement, as Derrida's methodology can only function as an inspiration to a project that is grounded in an actionable, practical study of classroom practice.

Though Ferdinand de Saussure, whose thought would go onto influence Derrida, amongst others working in the academy in the 1960s and 70s, posits a language both functional and possible through 'no positive terms,' and Derrida forwards a notion of existence and language through an arrangement of trace and deferral, we still manage to communicate. These

more abstract conceptualisations of self and language therefore may feel self-indulgent when one considers them through a research project exploring language, literary texts and education. They do, however, inform our understanding of student's relationships with text, in ways that are nuanced and useful, if approached as theoretical inspirations through which we can think differently about how and why students engage (or not) with text.

No person experiences a text in the same way, Spivak argues in the above, yet the 'same' text is taught to generations of 'different' students. Different cohorts of students can and do sit and succeed in the same exams, regardless of their unique positioning towards a text, which seems to undercut the more abstract and philosophical standpoint. To address this, one needs to consider what a text is, what consensus about the content of a text is, what can be 'done' with a text, and what reading is. None of these areas are simple to define, and each has been subject to much theoretical and philosophical debate. A classroom teacher is likely only consciously concerned with achieving a broad consensus about a text's content – readings that would be acknowledged by an examiner – and what can be done with a text – how it can be transformed into material for study and then examined. However, classroom teachers also adapt to their students: the words printed in an edition of *Macbeth* might be the same, however the people reading those words are various, each approaching their reading from a different context, and with a different set of resources to draw upon. In this way, the studied text may as well be entirely different to different readers, depending on their point of access: a not-quite-paradox that Derrida's focus on playfulness and the refusal of dualisms is well-placed to explore.

How, then, do we define 'text'? How do we ensure a relationship between the students and their own version of a text? And how do we allow for students to utilise their textual experience in a way that allows them to be successful in their GCSE examinations? A class of

students naturally want a ‘stable’ text: something that can be ‘learnt.’ They are not interested in a multiplicity of experience, nor do they, realistically, care about a philosophical paradigm that tells them their experience is unique, lonely, to them, and that their experience could only ever be similar, not ‘the same,’ as another student’s. Broadly speaking, what students *want* is to pass their exams, and progress onto the next phase of their lives. Teachers want this too, but we also want more for the students studying our subject than just an experience of examinations. Here, both Barthes and Derrida suggest reassuring approaches to conceptualising taught texts. Barthes considers text as ‘experienced only in an activity, in production.’ (Barthes, 1989), which situates ‘text’ as a product of ‘reader,’ whilst Derrida’s famous ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (Derrida, 1997a) has been, depending upon the translation, understood to mean that everything is text, or that all text must be received through context. This tells us that, whether students and teachers are conscious of it or not, studied texts will always be assemblages of the written word, experiences, and contexts. Once we accept this is the case, then teachers can use this realisation to adapt the content that they deliver, rather than focus on text as ‘canon.’

In my own teaching practice, I wanted students to be able to build relationships with studied texts, not just know them as data points for examinations – a model of learning *from* these texts, rather than *learning them*. With this goal, and moving beyond the concepts of text noted above, I would argue that student relationships to text can be understood more deeply through two specific Derridean concepts: trace and lack. These concepts can then inform teaching in a way that promotes states desirable for both the classroom teacher *and* the student – immersion and engagement.

Trace is a Derridean concession: a failure to fully eradicate the dualisms of Western Metaphysics, which (in a move typical to Deconstruction) *simultaneously* demonstrates that one can *never* have a true dualism as the one side will always already contain a trace of its

opposite. This irreducibility of opposite states is another Derridean aporia, and though philosophically frustrating, is a site for opportunity, as, whilst students are outside of the text they study, there is always already a trace of them within it to be exploited. For our purposes, the trace could be narrative, generic, linguistic, ludic, could be a space to be filled by a student's own creativity, could be character dynamic that holds resonance: the simple point is, whatever the student, and whatever the text, there is a way in. It will be argued later that the way in is frequently via a 'third text,' which becomes a concept that ties together the Derridean trace/lack, and my own variations on immersion and engagement. 'Third text' will be engaged with in more conceptual depth later on in thesis, however, in brief it is used as a description for student self-selected texts that assist them in conceptualising taught content, when there is otherwise a lack of frame through which understanding can be achieved. (RQ3)

Lack, for this project, is almost akin to Lacan's notion that to be human is to exist within a state of lack – his 'desire is the metonymy of the want-to-be' (Lacan, 2001)-, but functions more broadly: we are driven, textually, to supplement our texts, to enrich a plenitude whilst filling a gap – a typically Derridean aporia. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida explores the supplement (he engages in similar discussion of postscripts and archives elsewhere) as a way of filling what is 'missing' from an original text, whilst paradoxically functioning as an added extra outside of it. Moving away from Derrida's deliberately obscure and slippery notion of what lack might be, and anchoring it in the classroom, for our purposes a lack might be of representation (of race or gender, for example), of satisfaction in a narrative outcome, or even, as we shall see in the *Macbeth* case study, where the writer leaves an un-fleshed-out detail (a background character, a stage direction) that becomes a starting point for students to expand, inspired by 'third texts' that make up their own textual and narrative landscapes. In keeping with the spirit of the Derridean position inspiring this work, we could conversely argue that 'lack' by its very nature is an aporia, and therefore impossible to pin down, though, we can

reframe it as the opportunity that, in the spirit of Barthes' 'death of the author' permits us to fill in spaces in the text, to rework, or to extend them as 'fans.' (Barthes, 1984)

For us, then, lack, as related to trace (in its definition above) is a site of opportunity for students to fill a gap in the text with themselves. If we attempt to retain a hint of Lacan's notion of lack, this becomes more complex, however, as he connects lack not just with 'need', but with desire, which he frames differently. For Lacan, 'Desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction, nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second.' (Lacan, 2001) p. 287). By separating need from desire, and forwarding his theory that desire is of and for the Other, Lacan uses lack in a manner that is too specific, and sexually oriented, for our purposes here.

Trace and lack, conceptually inspired by Derrida, but moving away from his absolute refusal to work in definite terms, are, I will go on to argue, are the key to understanding the states of immersion and engagement that teachers desire in their students. By understanding how students relate to narrative lacks, and the traces of themselves they find within, we can gain a clear sense of why in opening Literature teaching up to multiple modes we can build textual relationships deeper than the transactional sense of 'learning' texts for examinations.

Moving Towards New Theory

Considering the hugely diverse range of influences that have a bearing on this thesis, it is important to find the novel and original nuances of theory that take this project forward, but to do so in a way that it ultimately coherent. As stated in the research questions and the overview of this project above, (re)theorising the ideas of 'immersion' and 'engagement' will provide the theoretical core to this thesis, so the rest of this chapter will focus on rendering as specific the general terms of 'immersion' and 'engagement.' Derrida's work will be used to

inspire both the development of these concepts, but also *the relationship* they have with one another. His process of deconstruction will allow us to explore theoretical inconsistencies and flaws in existing ideas around immersion and engagement, whilst retaining a playful stance towards trying to hold theory as rigid in definition.

One of the common threads woven through Derrida's work, as previously noted, is the notion of undecidability or irresolvability. Whether this manifests in his work focused on aporias, his notion of *differance*, or his ideas around trace, dissemination, supplement, or archive, we recognise that one of his central concerns is how, when we examine them in close detail, the dialectics of Western metaphysics are neither true dialectics, nor fully examined by the social normalities that hold them to be true and self-evident. (Derrida, 2001a; Derrida, 1997b; Derrida, 1973)

As meaning emerges through difference, both on the axis of the paradigmatic and of syntagmatic (Saussure: 1974), we are unable to resolve either the kinship *or* the difference between terms. Furthermore, in our consumption of texts we respond, firstly, to a thing that is a 'text' in the poststructural sense of the term, that is, an assemblage – and, secondly to a scenario that cannot be replicated, meaning that no two readers can ever consume the same text, by virtue of their own diachrony, and the physical conditions under which a text is received (Derrida: 1997). This is powerful when considering the relationship between texts and students, as we become aware that whatever the 'text' is, it can always be deconstructed and space for the student found within it. The question then is *how* can this deconstruction happen organically in a classroom?

Superficially, the theoretical stance of deconstruction here may appear similar to a Reader Response Theory approach of analysis, but they have core, fundamental differences in that for deconstruction, the text is not created out of Discourse between reader and writer, it is,

in fact, not a stable entity at all, but a set of contested terms with no stable core. It could be argued that the ‘de’ of deconstruction actually puts it at odds with the constructive Discourse of Reader Response Theory, as it centres at lack at the centre of the text: the irresolvable gap at the heart of language. The impetus for this thesis comes from the impenetrable nature of some of the NC GCSE set texts for resistant or less able learners, so the recreation of the text is important, certainly, but the work of this project begins before students are comfortable to commence their reading in the first place (Rosenblatt, 1988; Rosenblatt and American Education Fellowship. Commission on Human Relations, 1938). As we explore in the second research question, it is important not only to understand the inhibiting factors for immersion and engagement, but also to come to an understanding of what promotes them.

The irresolvability of philosophical difference that deconstruction challenges is problematic, however, as it is in the very nature of humanity to crave a ‘stable centre,’ meaning that analysis of this form can be challenging to engage with itself (Spivak in Derrida: 1997, xi). Of course, it is part of Derrida’s project to deconstruct this stability, and to undercut any sense of language and being as ‘definite,’ and as a result, we appear destined to fall into the realm of psychoanalytic Thanatos – a constant state of desire unfulfillable whilst we are alive - as the state of the text, and of the reader, are always in flux and deferred (Freud 1922, Derrida: 1997, 143). The process of living itself, however, and of being in time, means that we are always already in constant flux, and as such stability can never be anything other than illusory. Despite this extreme reading, it is much more productive to view what is undecidable as a site of opportunity, rather than as a site of hopelessness. If every individual, by virtue of history and location, is able to experience a text that – within a set of fixed parameters - is uniquely their own, then this affords all readers a way into, and a space within, even the most canonical of texts: an important starting point for all teachers and educators. Furthermore, a teacher could question who it is that gains from the presumed ‘stable centre’ of meaning, especially in the

texts presented by the English National Curriculum, as this presupposed an ‘average’ student, an ideal who does not exist, which further implies that all other students may well be alienated by an expectation of their conformity.

The textual space Derrida’s thinking creates will allow for us to deconstruct the relationship between person and narrative, and to explore how students can overcome alienation from the canon. Before we explore this through the case studies, however, it will first be necessary to explore the states that we want the (influenced by, but not quite Derridean) trace to generate: existing ideas of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’.

What is Immersion?

The concept of immersion can be approached from three fronts: as a general idea developed from its dictionary definition; as a term that has been semi-formulated to frame the experience of digital play; and as the account for a form of pedagogy sometimes employed in the teaching of MFL.

To begin with, we consider the dictionary definition:

immersion, n.

The action of immerging or immersing.¹

¹ **The action of immerging or immersing.**

1.

a. Dipping or plunging into water or other liquid, and transf. into other things.

c1450

b. The administration of Christian baptism by the dipping or plunging of the whole person in water: distinguished from affusion or aspersion.

a1631

c. Alchemy. Reduction of a metal in some solvent.

1683

d. Ceramics. The application of the glaze to pottery by dipping it into a vessel filled with the glaze-cream.

2. transferred sense and figurative

a. Absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc. **

The etymology of ‘immersion’ offers four branches: the original, the transferred or figurative, and two scientific uses particular to astronomy and microscopy. The latter two can be discounted, but the original and transferred senses are useful to explore.

In its oldest sense, originating around 1450, ‘immersion’ refers to ‘dipping or plunging into water or other liquid, and transf. into other things.’ Latterly – around 1631 – this definition was extended to encompass the, ‘administration of Christian baptism by the dipping or plunging of the whole person in water: distinguished from affusion or aspersion.’ Both of these conceptualisations of immersion rely on a notion of being completely surrounded or covered, usually with water: a literal encompassment or transformation of state.

The transferred or figurative sense emerges in common use around 1647, when it comes to describe, ‘absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc.’ When this is considered in line with the literal sense of the word it proposes a strong term, possibly stronger than its casual usage suggests. To be immersed in a ‘condition, action, interest,’ you would need to be fully submersed by it. Consequently, one would have to question whether the immersion in this figurative model is true immersion, which indicates that this transferred sense requires further exploration.

As noted in the previous chapter, ‘immersion’ as a pedagogical idea appears around 1965, where it is ‘a method or system of teaching (or learning) a foreign language in an environment where all communication is conducted in the language, esp. at a school, etc., run

1647 H. More Philos. Poems To Rdr. 7/1 Others, whom sensuall immersion or the deadnesse of Melancholy have more deeply seiz'd upon.

b. A method or system of teaching (or learning) a foreign language in an environment where all communication is conducted in the language, esp. at a school, etc., run for this purpose. Frequently attrib., as immersion course, immersion school. Chiefly N. Amer.

1965 New Statesman 19 Nov. 811/1 (advt.) Berlitz ‘total immersion’ courses. Berlitz ‘immersion’ courses. The 4–6 week ‘Blitz’ courses for busy international executives.

3. Astron. The disappearance of a celestial body behind another or in its shadow, as in an occultation or eclipse: opp. to emersion. 1690

4. Microscopy. The introduction of a liquid, as water or oil, between the object-glass and the object. 1875 [see immersion lens n. at Compounds 1c]. 1877 [see immersion fluid n. at Compounds 1c].

** Thesaurus: *the mind* » *mental capacity* » *curiosity* » *attention, need* » *earnest attention, concentration* » [noun] intendance (1390), intention (c1400), intension (a1619), absorption (1640), immersion (1647), preoccupation (1788), concentration (1823), engrossment (1838), enchainment (1849), submergence (1872), immersal (1901), absorbency (1974)

for this purpose.’ (OED: accessed 27/12/17). So, in terms of pedagogy, ‘immersion’ originates with a theory of language acquisition, but language acquisition achieved by being surrounded by the language one wishes to learn. This idea of immersion goes beyond a body being surrounded and covered. In this version of the term, the immersion is active - there is a process of transference - but is also invasive, as the immersing body enters into and alters the subject. Furthermore, a student within this framework is also immersed in culture and location; they are alienated from their home culture in order to assume elements of a new one. The process is presumably necessary – language acquisition as survival – but also aggressive as, to pursue the liquid metaphor, the subject is at risk of drowning.

If we unpack this figurative use of immersion, then we have a body – or at least a mind – that is the subject in need of knowledge acquisition. Then, we have a body of knowledge – like an immersing fluid – that in some way needs to be mastered and internalised: an objectification. As a pedagogical strategy, it relies on the fact that, if the mind is submerged in the body of knowledge, then that knowledge will be drawn into the mind as the mind is unable to escape it. To be fully immersed is to be fully consumed into a new body. It is an overwhelming conceptualisation of a learning environment: the object-knowledge is everywhere around you. It also fails to acknowledge the barriers to education that may be experienced by, for example, a resistant learner or a child whose SEND needs require different kinds of support.

In an immersive model of education of the kind suggested above, there are positive and negative implications for a student. On the one hand, learning is *potentially* rapid, on the other, learning is overpowering, and no space is provided for self. The violence implicit in this cultural ‘drowning,’ however, is *not* a sustainable, or particularly desirable, state for the English classroom – it is necessary that within the state of ‘immersion’ created by literary texts, that a student is able to retain or find at least a trace of themselves for them to not only succeed in an

exam subject, but also develop a relationship with text that is positive *and* productive. Meanwhile, our framing of this relationship as one in the manner of a ‘trace’ is a deliberately Derridean play. Spivak, when introducing *Of Grammatology* notes that, ‘The structure of the sign is determined by the trace or track of that other which is forever absent,’ in other words reminding us of the ephemerality of language, presence, and writing (Derrida, 1997b, xi). By referring to ‘trace’ in the context of a classroom, we can capture the evolving identity of the subject, and the passing of language into and through that subject, with a consideration of how language can be both learnt and lost, and how that relationship with language changes a student. **Our concept of ‘trace,’ is functionally a metaphor for the irresolvable separation/relationship that exists in tension between student and text sees the textual trace present in the student, and the trace of the students’ identity in the text.**

Outside of scholarship pertaining to MFL teaching, academic references to immersion tend towards being literal (the physics of liquids) or are made in reference to digital technologies like virtual reality. (Webb, 2012b).

Definitions of immersion as a technological experience most frequently stem from Janet Murray’s work in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, as hers is one of the earliest texts taking a figurative look at a literal term (Murray, 1997b). For Murray, immersion is,

...a metaphorical term derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. We seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in the ocean or a swimming pool: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality, as different as water is from air, that takes over all of our attention, our whole perceptual apparatus. (98)

This idea of immersion suggests that to be ‘immersed’ means to have one’s senses overcome by a textual reality that is ‘as different as water is from air’: in other words, to access a text in a way that is totally absorbing to the senses. This maps onto the non-metaphorical, dictionary definition of the word, in the sense of, ‘Dipping or plunging,’ but also poses questions around

the extent to which a fully immersed state is achievable through technology now, and how this may change in the future as technologies of the senses develop. It is also worth interrogating to what extent a state of *full* immersion is desirable (after our discussion of MFL experience), and what the motivations for, and outcomes of, this state might be – would we be able to differentiate the non-immersed reality from the immersed state? Would the experience be claustrophobic rather than pleasurable, as in the case of a student having to function in a school environment where their own is not the language spoken? Additionally, we would also need to question the differences between psychological (mental absorption) and perceptual (full) immersion – is immersion of the mind enough, or should the sense be fooled in order for a state to fully be considered immersive.

Murray's discussion of immersion has been historically critiqued, along with *Hamlet on the Holodeck* as a whole, particularly by theorists grouped as ludologists in one of the classic divisions in Games Studies. Her focus on the narrative aspects of games neglects the unique aspects of the medium, and embodied experience of play. The distance between her text and the current time of writing is also a point of critique, as technology has advanced significantly since the book's original publication, so it is necessarily considered outdated. However, one point in which we find particular agreement with Murray is where she suggests that textual unity – the lack of elements that would be jarring to the reader/player – is a key element in achieving immersion. Even in, for example, a generic horror text of whatever medium, where the purpose is to scare, a unity of narrative and genre-completeness would still allow for immersion. In fact, this is what would allow fear to be successfully achieved.

McMahan (McMahan, 2003a) explored the depth of Murray's conceptualisation, and argues that this initial definition is limited in scope. She therefore expands her own exploration of immersion to consider the related concepts of 'engagement' and 'presence,' as well as considering immersion as either 'perceptual' or 'psychological.' This is an interesting move, as

it suggests that immersion can be techno-literal, but also that a text can be so absorbing you can achieve a state akin to submersion simply in the consuming of it. 'Perceptual' immersion creates the sense of being consumed, bodily, by a (presumably technological) experience, whereas 'psychological' immersion appears to more closely map onto the idea of immersion that is in casual usage, though this division of immersion ignores the work done by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the field of phenomenology, whereby he suggested embodied identity already incorporates the perceptual apparatus, and therefore the distinction between the two is false (Merleau-Ponty, 2013).

If we consider why McMahan has created a divided concept of immersion, it is clear to see she is trying to account for what she views as a deficit in Murray's model (supplementing a lack, as it were). The version of immersion termed 'psychological' is the more accessible of the divided state, as it is metaphorically quite thin, but, as with Murray's conceptualisation, it is necessary to query to what extent these states are truly possible, and to reflect on the extent to which it is possible to do so within the parameters of this thesis as it is pedagogically based, rather than a study in psychological and physiological monitoring. Considering Merleau-Ponty's work provides a bridge between the fields of pedagogy and the human sciences, however, as his phenomenological stance focuses on the self as embodied, and it is the experience of this embodied self that this project seeks to explore.

Working with Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, I would suggest that it is not possible to have perceptual immersion without psychological immersion occurring in parallel, as we can see in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological description of perception where he argues,

We make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible only through perception, we end by understanding neither. We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world. If we did we should see that the quality is never experienced immediately, and that all consciousness is consciousness of something. Nor is this 'some-thing' necessarily an identifiable object. (Merleau-Ponty, 2013, 5)

Here, he notes, in our embodied state, how it is impossible to experience the world in any way but through our perception, and therefore the ‘psychological’ is inextricable from the perceptual. Simultaneously, the converse is also true, as we negotiate existence in our embodied state, a dialectic representing yet another Derridean trace: we do not connect with what we perceive, only with perception, a ghost of the object with lack at its centre. Merleau-Ponty also argues for indeterminacy between the objective world and expressive values, where he posits indeterminacy as a ‘positive phenomena’ and that, ‘It is in this atmosphere that quality arises. Its meaning is an equivocal meaning; we are concerned with an expressive value rather than with logical signification.’(Merleau-Ponty, 2013) The lack at the heart of Merleau-Ponty’s ideas here appears significantly Derridean in nature, as the refusal of definite terms means that true connection is held at bay by a *differance* between person and ‘real’, signifier and signified, with the focus on what is experiential.

Merleau-Ponty's determination to avoid concrete definitive positions on the world, laying the groundwork for Derrida’s generation of poststructuralists, sits productively within our discussion of immersion, because he comes back to the notion of the body in its ‘phenomenological field,’ that is, every person’s unique experience of phenomena. This foreshadows the unique position of the person with regards to text in Derrida’s work, in that perception supplants ‘real’ connection, and therefore this ephemeral link leaves the space to conceptualise the lack of definite terms through relational traces and supplemental additions by audience to their texts. This can be observed across the case studies through the students’ different manifestations of immersion and engagement, their different influences, and the different texts they themselves produced. Of course, Merleau-Ponty deals with ontology more generally: here we need to progress towards a concept of immersion that is rooted specifically in the relation of person to text, which both is, and is not, more akin to the work of Derrida.

Returning more explicitly to our theoretical exploration of immersion, McMahan and Murray, despite the issues raised through Merleau-Ponty's work here, were working beyond the physical world of perceptions that Merleau-Ponty discusses, and therefore their work cannot be discounted. The digital world disrupts our perceptions and raises questions about the nature of embodiment in a way that helps to form our understanding of immersion: in the near future, technology might be able to fully immerse the senses, if it cannot already, but all that means for this project is that eventually it may become even easier to achieve a literal 'immersion' in a text, through an overwhelming sensory experience. The indeterminate boundaries between the psychological and perceptual demonstrate how the senses influence the mind, but also that the mind can shape the senses.

Considering the psychological and perceptual aspects of immersion, if one can be fully immersed in a text, it is necessary to ask, *what is it that permits for this state to occur, particularly in a classroom?* We know that in the MFL classroom, it means being unavoidably surrounded by language. In the case of a resistant or struggling learner in an English lesson, however, they may well refuse to pick up a book in the first place, so immersion would not occur, and therefore no further learning could be derived from the experience. Our focus then must be the steps that have to be taken before immersion can realistically occur, particularly in relation to digital and literary text. Whilst a student may resist immersion in a written text in a formal setting, this does not mean that they never experience immersion in other, informal settings – some manner of multimodal content on their phone, a television show, a game – so we can consider other avenues for leading 'resistant learners' back to formal immersion in studied texts that acknowledges their prior, lived experience, as will be demonstrated in the structure of the case studies.

We also have to ask: is a student's self-awareness a fundamental part of immersion? If we consider how immersion might work positively in the MFL/EAL classroom, then we could

argue that factors include a lack of methods of distraction, and sufficient support for students to feel ‘safe’ in their learning environment, along with some marker of progress having been made, as a motivating factor. In addition, for a student learning a language beyond that which they grew up with, we also must acknowledge a different set of contextual and motivating factors. If language learning is occurring in an immersed setting, then immersion is forceful – the student **has** to learn in order to integrate. For children encountering a literary text, if it is in their native tongue then they may be motivated by enjoyment, or by the desire for academic success to become invested in it, but they are not coerced with quite the same degree of necessity. **For texts to become immersive or engaging (in the sense that will be developed later in this chapter) their narratives and construction must be relevant or relatable, must have a point of access, or must be in some way mirroring for students, containing a trace of who they feel themselves to be.** Even if ‘who they feel themselves to be’ is simply someone who has passed their English GCSEs, never to study the subject again.

Of course, the above description of immersive classroom practice is grossly simplified, and the separation of literature teaching and EAL practice can also be challenged. Schaeffer and Antonioli argue that, in early years teaching particularly, reading is considered as a tool rather than a skill. They suggest, “Schools too often ... privilege the analytic approach, notably textual commentary. This is an illusion: competence in "literary" reading is ... above all procedural in nature—that is to say, it is founded on implicit learning processes inherent in the practice of reading.” (Schaeffer & Antonioli, 2013, p.277) This can serve as a reminder, in our reconceptualization of immersion, that there are technical- and skill- barriers that some students must overcome in order to experience immersion. For some students to become immersed in a text, it is first necessary to counter literacy issues or resilience issues. Herein is an argument to be made about **introducing narrative pathways other than the written word in order for**

students to become engaged with a narrative first, and then becoming immersed later when they are already invested in a text, allowing for the trace of themselves to be found to established the linking of text/self.

Narrative is an important point of consideration, that takes us further from the version of immersion that arises from the MFL/EAL classroom. For McMahan, progressing her exploration of immersion, as it pertains to games and gaming, her focus is predominantly on narrative effects as she suggests,

Immersion means the player is caught up in the world of the game's ... but it also refers to the player's love of the game and the strategy that goes into it ... It seems clear that if we are talking about immersion in video games at the diegetic level and immersion at the nondiegetic level, then we are talking about two different things, with possibly conflicting sets of aesthetic conventions. (68)

And it is here we can see a notable point of divergence from Murray's foundational definition: immersion becomes a further-divided term – a split between an involvement in narrative or game mechanics, working as an attempt to justify the separation of the perceptual and the psychological – neither version is particularly deep – and moving into what we will go onto consider as the split between 'immersion' and 'engagement.'

In McMahan's schema, we can be immersed through our senses or through our emotions, and this immersion can be with the story or the way the story is assembled, delivered, or contextualised. The diegetic/nondiegetic split seems to offer an interesting pathway for further exploration, however, in order to resolve her dissatisfaction with a simple conceptualisation of immersion, McMahan instead maps it onto one of the key historic debates of Game Studies – the division between the narrative and ludic elements of game play. Immersion can be about an involvement with a storyline, but it can move beyond that into a fascination with the mechanics of the gameplay itself. In order to confront the narrative/ludic variants of immersion, McMahan posits a difference between 'immersion' and a state she terms

‘engagement,’ which, I would argue, leaves her conceptualisation of immersion too ‘thin,’ or at least underexploited. In her work, ‘engagement’ covers the ludic elements of a game, whereby a play becomes involved with the mechanics of play. However, the acknowledgement of the ludic aspects of games, as opposed to solely narrative media, is an important one, as we will go on to explore in relation not to students playing games, as such, but to them authoring games for themselves.

For Ensslin, Bell and Smith, conversely to the above, technology is an ontological consideration when considering immersion in specifically digital narratives. They argue that, ‘it is necessary to see immersion in digital fiction in terms of a deictic and thus ontological shift, because the reader-player of a three-dimensional digital fiction is always embodied in a separate ontological domain in the form of an onscreen avatar.’(Ensslin, Bell and Smith, 2019) The context-specific experience leads us once again back to our borrowing of the Derridean trace, as, though the avatar and body are separate entities, one informs the existence and actions of the other – the play controls the avatar, whilst the programmed limits of the avatar dictate the available behaviours of the body. They go on to suggest that, ‘reader-players are what Ensslin (2009) defines as ‘doubly-situated’, ‘embodied’ as direct receivers, ... [and] ... ‘re-embodied’ through feedback which they experience in represented form...’(Ensslin et al., 2019) So, in digital ‘embodiment’ there is an experience where the participant is both fully immersed and fully separated from the narrative. In exploring the thinking here, it appears that the notion of ‘trace’ that we are adapting from Derrida is, in fact, already implicit in discussion of digital immersion, particularly in the ludic elements highlighted in this particular reading.

Furthermore, if we continue to push the balance of our understanding of the avatar-as-understood-through-trace, it follows that the avatar can be read as a trace of the physical body of the player – it takes up digital space, interacts with digital objects, projects into the game

world, is the locus for sight, and the illusory receptor for sound – but only at the same time as also representing a lack – that of the player’s physical body in the space of a game. In this sense the avatar is supplemental, in Derrida’s conceptualisation: it is an added-extra in extension of the body the player already possesses, whilst also highlighting the lack of the play inside the game. The avatar is a crack in the world of the game through which the player gains entry, providing what the game lacks whilst simultaneously interjecting into a complete, closed world. At the same time, the avatar, as a point of focalisation introduces a further lack/trace/supplemental relationship through it being the limiting factor through which a game world is seen, and therefore experienced (Genette, cited in Edmiston, 1989).

This brings us to question if the same degree of immersive presence is possible through literature. In first person narratives, the argument is easy enough to make – we are situated as an ‘I.’ But what of the third person? Well, there are different narratives *and* perspectives in games, as situated by the direction of the eye of the player. Are we embodied, or observing from a remove as we control the character. The different is the level of effort required to move the narrative forward (Aarseth’s ergodics (Aarseth, 1997)), whether it is the turning of a page, or a more complex set of physical manipulations. **The physicality of the reader/player, then, remains a consideration for a definition of immersion, through their phenomenological experience of literal or perceptual presence.**

Ensslin, Bell and Smith’s work is a useful way of bridging between Merleau-Ponty’s thinking, McMahan’s work and our own, but it still mainly deals with the aspects of immersion pertaining to presence. The phrasing of this version of ‘immersion’ is different to what we see in Murray and McMahan, compared to Murray’s fully liquid metaphor, and McMahan’s focus on the experience on game narrative. What this diversion highlights is that, though all the aforementioned have sought to theorise immersion, they have not defined their terms clearly

enough – the metaphorical nature of the term has permitted too much room for ambiguity. This could be because the term functions in a space of Derridean irresolvability, but could equally be an issue that arises for the attempt to theorise a personal phenomenon without access to the biological data that would quantify what happens to the body and mind in the state that we are describing as ‘immersed.’ For the purpose of this thesis, a baseline of irresolvable difference between participants is acceptable, as the foundation of this chapter indicated through its engagement with Derrida. What is most significant is understanding what the conditions for immersion are, and being able to conceptualise the creative work that follows on from it. The conditions for each student may be different in some ways, but we seek to provide an overarching set of conditions that can shape our understanding of a state that is in some way common across people, in both its appearance and its outcomes.

Moving our argument forwards, Marie Laure Ryan has made regular reference to her own conceptualisation of immersion, as relates to narrative (Ryan, 1998). She argues:

The text as world is immersive, because the reader becomes in make-believe a member of the fictional world. We can distinguish three types of Immersion: (1) In spatial Immersion, the reader develops a sense of place, a sense of being on the scene of the narrated events, a sense of witnessing the action directly. [...] (2) In temporal immersion, the reader is caught in narrative suspense and experiences the burning desire to know what happens next. [...] (3) In emotional immersion, the reader develops feelings of attachment or revulsion for the characters. (Ryan, 1998, p. 138)

Her arguments are useful, as they move immersion from video game-specific analysis into a space more receptive to the dimension of narrative, though we also see the implication that immersion is inherently linked to narrative, which holds relevance to our focus on the state of immersion as applicable to the English classroom. The separation of immersion into spatial, temporal, and emotional, is potentially less divisive than the conceptualisations mentioned previously, as they are transcendent of medium. We will retain this ternary in spirit in our own definition, as it allows a broadening of access points from which students are able to be

involved in text, and this broadness allows for our work of concept re-definition to be useful to educators of different kinds of students.

Considering other wider uses of ‘immersion’, whilst discussing the idea of simulation, Schaeffer states, meanwhile, that, ‘...immersive processes are not limited to fictional narratives...’ (Schaeffer, 2012) *Further* broadening our understanding of ‘narrative,’ as even nonfiction texts have a narrative structure and a ‘story’ to tell. He then goes on to ask the much more interesting question, “What is at stake here is in fact the question of the target domain of narrative immersion: does the reader or spectator immerse into a (fictional) world, or into a narrative act depicting a world?” In other words, is it that we recreate another world to move into, or is immersion a Derridean play within an existing structure? The structures we find comfort in are often narrative, but do not have to be - we can be immersed in simple and repetitive tasks without an overarching sense of story, a suggestion which re-ties us to the ludic aspects of game play. Whether immersion is creative (mentally constructing the narrative) or playful (weaving the self into the existing narrative frame), Schaeffer’s work, as with Ryan’s helps us form a concept that is inherently active. Immersion of this sort is not a passive experience: the subject is involved in *doing something* with the text.

However, the complete engulfment of immersion does seem to have historically, contrastingly been understood as a passive: the immersed person feels as if they are within the text, and are in no position to change or shape it – they are simply receptive to it. The field of ‘Cognitive Narratology,’ which is interested in not the structures of narratives, but how the human mind responds to and inhabits them, however, posits that immersion could never be inactive, as that is not how the brain and the mind work (Herman, 2019). Though this project does not study the biology and chemistry of the working brain, work like that cited above does suggest that our theoretical work here is, in some way, echoed by specialists in other fields.

Herman's work allows us to maintain that **a sense of activity is key to defining immersion** as a concept, even though to be immersed is to appear to be engulfed.

The consumer of the text, then, is not erased, remaining at least as a trace presence in the text, as full immersion is a complex, active, though seemingly impossible state (an aporia of the sort explored by Derrida at length). The term as passive, therefore, cannot be carried forward: in our fullest possible form of immersion, we retain at least as a trace of ourselves, but at the same time, though fully present, contain a trace of our own erasure. For our reconceptualization of immersion, this is significant as we can argue that **one of the defining aspects of immersion is that for it to occur, a person must have a reciprocal rather than passive relationship with the text**. Indeed, Calleja noted a sense of immersion whereby a player of a game is noticed back as the game responds to them, creating immersion through the effect a person's presence has on a text (Calleja, 2011). Regarding literary narrative, I would extend this and argue that a person's presence in a text of this sort also changes it, that the narrative re-forms around the reader, as they bring the weight of their individual contexts and cultural capital, warping the apparently fixed structure.

The idea of the trace woven through Derrida's work remains applicable here. As we have already discussed, Derrida's work is often caught up with *aporias*, and his systematic exploration of such problems provides a framework through which the more abstract or theoretical elements of immersion (and engagement) might be explored. In an aporetic framework, true immersion, it could be argued, may be seen as irresolvable, which is why it is difficult to pin down. This is not a satisfactory end point for our discussion, however, as explaining immersion away by suggesting that we exist in narratives, whilst narrative exist in us evades rather than confronts the term we seek to define. To counter this irreducibility, what we *can* state in confident terms is that there *are* a set of conditions that promote the experience

of immersion, and that there is some commonality in the immersed state people achieve in relation to text, and this is what is pertinent to the teacher of English Literature. After all, the purpose of this thesis is to explore classroom phenomena, not to create a philosophical treatise.

We can argue, in light of Derrida's work, but finding our way back to the relationship between person and text, that the immersed state could potentially be reimagined as a moment where the consumer of a text allows themselves to be surrounded by that text, but discovers something of themselves inside it by way of exchange. As such, the text and its consumer are within one another and held in tension through this relationship. This is a simplification of an experience that appears to transcend our usual understanding of spatial and temporal location, though, and still relies on the embodied subject being a point of intersection or permeability between their interiority and the text (which is understood as neither interior nor exterior, but both). Aside from the poststructural irresolvability of this proposed state, when we consider how a student might sit within this experience, we could consider immersion as desirable, as the subject engages with a text on a level beyond the 'learning of content' model of education, implied by the National Curriculum for England, and challenged by this thesis. This 'active relationship' immersion continues to challenge past casual usage of the term – a notion already challenged by immersion in game narratives where the 'reader' is always already in an active state of 'reading', as a natural progression from older, literary, understandings of what it is to be a reader (Barthes, 1989; Barthes, 1991; Rosenblatt, 1988; Rosenblatt, 2005).

If we consider the things that allow for immersion in a text to occur, as suggested above – familiarity in the narrative, a reciprocal relationship with the text, a shifted sense of presence – these elements can only be immersive if they are not so challenging as to alienate their subject, thereby informing us, again, that 'safety' or familiarity is a key indicator for

immersion. If we reconsider the discussion so far, then at this stage we assert that immersion is characterised by a sense of reciprocity, a relationship of trace between subject and text, and the idea that, at its core, immersion is a concept underpinned by activity, not passive consumption.

Inside Immersion: Presence and Technology

Before we move on to discuss ‘engagement,’ it is necessary that we briefly acknowledge the role media and technologies play in immersion. I have noted ‘presence’ as an indicator in our emerging definition of immersion, but have, perhaps, fallen into the trap of using it as casually as ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ are used elsewhere.

For Lombard and Ditton ‘presence’ in the consumption of media - a state disrupted and problematised by immersion - itself can be understood plainly as ‘the perceptual *illusion* of non-mediation’ (1997). They argue that the term,

... indicates that this phenomenon involves continuous ... responses of the human sensory, cognitive, and affective processing systems to objects and entities in a person's environment. An “illusion of nonmediation” occurs when a person fails to perceive or acknowledge the existence of a medium in his/her communication environment and responds as he/she would if the medium were not there. ... “nonmediated” here is defined as experienced without human-made technology... (np.)

Here, even in perspectives less intricate than Derrida’s, we find reference to the play of uncertainty that the human perceptual apparatus is at the mercy of. This sense of undecidability haunts any attempt to concretise human experience: we seek connections, stability, and what is ‘real’ in the illusion of non-mediation. I would argue that what we connect with is the trace of a (self)presence that allows us to immerse and temporarily forget the medium of transmission.

Returning to Lombard and Ditton’s definition, one could argue that, as technology develops, it could become very difficult to distinguish between presence and telepresence, meaning that immersion in a text or experience could occur fluidly and unconsciously, as

presence could be entirely illusory as perceptions are fooled, and all media are understood as ‘remediated’ (Bolter and Grusin, 1999). This experience could be a perceptual immersion that masquerades as ‘real’ experience, something that poststructuralist and postmodern theorist like Derrida, in terms of trace (2001), and Baudrillard (1983), in terms of simulation, have covered at length. However, it could, conversely, be argued that the illusion of non-mediation is already here, as our sense of being-in-the-world is always already mediated by language, so we never truly had access to what is ‘real,’ an idea that has underpinned much of our understanding of language since the work of Saussure (de Saussure, 1974). **Immersion in this sense acts as an elision between the narrative of ‘real’ and the narrative of fiction.**

As Derrida states that trace – as co-opted for our idea of immersion - is ‘...not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces and refers beyond itself’, (1973: p.156) we can already see the suggestion that, in fact, there is no ‘where’ of presence when it comes to being immersed. In terms of our consideration of technology and presence, such an argument causes us to question if ‘presence’ is an appropriate term to use at all. It implies that all we have are traces and increasing levels of separation from a ‘real’ we could not access anyway. The interaction of this line of thought with ideas about remediation and non-mediation would be an interesting site for further research, though it falls beyond the scope of this project. What is important for this thesis is how such ideas can be used to say something about student experiences in a classroom.

The declaration of non-presence is not unproblematic, as a ‘simulacrum of a presence’ still implies a presence of some sort. By referring back to *Freud and the Scene of Writing*, we can argue that the simulacrum of presence is related to Derrida’s understanding of how a person is able to experience time. The present, in time, can only be understood after it has past and is, therefore, no longer present (2001, p.265-6), so it would follow that, in space, the presence of the trace, can only be understood from a different place, where it is no longer what or where it

was. In this case, we can consider that student experience is more complicated than we would usually conceive, and therefore the classroom has more potential to provide experience beyond the purely didactic, in shifting a student's sense of what it is possible to feel. **Immersion, in this poststructuralist sense, links to the Derridean idea of deferral as a less fixed experience of being,** and as such, immersion becomes a state out of time. Here, we could link to the popular concept of 'flow', however, the concepts' primary theorist problematically suggested that some mental health conditions prevent some groups of people from achieving this state, thereby rendering it too reductive and exclusory for our purposes here (Csikszentmihalyi, 2002).

The second part of the Derrida quotation, the proposal that the trace 'refers beyond itself' can be unpacked in two main ways: firstly, a trace holds in tension an inside and an outside: there is something unique to the trace, and then there is what is outside it. As a trace 'refers' to what is outside of it, the implication is that what comprises the trace is an expression of what it is not. This idea of an inside and outside, however, returns to the idea of presence, which, it has already been argued, the trace does not have, which can be seen as in relation to language as a form of thinking along the lines of Saussure's 'no positive terms.' A second way of looking at the idea of the reference is to see the trace as part of a network or a chain of signification. The trace acts as an arbitrary signifier for a signified it has no connection with, and, as such, the trace can stand in place for what it is not. What this means in terms of immersion is that it is a contradictory state wherein the linkages with the text are illusory, as a fictional text is only a reality in an enclosed world in and of itself. Though, conversely, it will always already contain within itself a trace of what is 'real' and is therefore never wholly fiction. As will be seen in the *Beowulf* chapter, however, the fictional boundaries of a text can bleed within the shared culture and language of a social group. The nature of this shifting and evolving notion of trace also acts as a reminder that the boundaries and limitations we place

around texts are illusory: a text has no real inside and outside, just the structures we place for ourselves to make sense of a particular aspect of the world.

Here, however, we must distance ourselves from Derrida's minutely attentive exploration of detail in the reality of experience: our conceptualisation of immersion needs to be applicable to real-world occurrences in real life classrooms. Whether a student is learning from a text or not is, to an extent, an observable phenomenon, and as such it is important to pull back from becoming caught in conceptualisations that are purely abstract. The value of these diversions into a purely theoretical space are that they offer the opportunity for us to explore the margins of terms like immersion and engagement, where their boundaries have not been, nor are very likely to be, satisfactorily defined. What has also been highlighted here is the uncertainty introduced when trying to define – or delineate – lived experience through metaphor – as in 'immersion' – or through a vague and multifaceted term – as with 'engagement'. The Derridean 'supplement' and 'trace,' are useful in problematising how we attempt to define a concrete understanding of what immersion and engagement are, but though it is possible to cyclically discuss the states and their root causes, the fact is that these terms are being used to describe lived states, and as such need to be observed in a real-world setting, as will be demonstrated in the cases studies presented later in this thesis.

Immersion then, in terms we *can* pin down, can be found in a reciprocal relationship between subject and text, through traces of self. It requires a sense of safety, and an avoidance of insurmountable challenge. The state causes a shifted sense of presence, beyond the perceived boundaries of a text, and into a liminal space of possibility. Immersion also, as we will now argue, is held in relationship (in the study of texts) with a sister state of 'engagement.'

Engagement

When we move into considering the idea of engagement, it is necessary to return to the work of McMahan introduced above. McMahan's conceptualisation of 'engagement' differentiates the 'absorption' idea of immersion by the deep involvement a player can gain from finding resonance with the mechanics of the game, in other words, where a player connects their use of a game to an understanding of wider reference points, whether these be contextual, technical, or personal.

In this creation of a dual idea of immersion/engagement, McMahan was prefigured by Douglas and Hargadon (Douglas and Hargadon, 2001a), who similarly posit an idea of immersion and engagement as linked but different concepts. They state that,

The pleasure of immersion in interactives stems from our ability to take guided action and see the outcomes from our choice of one or more scripts within a single schema. In contrast, the pleasure of engagement with hypertext fiction comes from users' access to a wide repertoire of schemas and scripts, our attempts to discover congruencies between the hypertext and an array of often mutually exclusive schemas, and, ultimately, our ability to make sense of the work as a whole. (p. 160)

This suggests that engagement is hyper- and intertextual. The user of a text is driven, by a love for the text, to find linkages within and beyond it, assuming a viewpoint that is more holistic. The hypertextuality of texts suggests an interesting variation on the ideas of engagement and immersion, as the surrounding 'fluid' of immersion, and the web of textual meanings of engagement, offer a sense of continuity in conceptualisations of what keeps us interested in texts – we are interested in what fully encompasses us. The creative aspect of this idea of engagement furthermore presupposes the Derridean 'lack,' and our idea to fill in what is ~~not~~ absent from a ~~complete~~ text (to frame the construction in his style of 'erasure').

However, Douglas and Hargadon's work on immersion and engagement also suggests an idea of immersion that is quite specific: taking influence from linguistics, cognitive psychology and art history they use the idea of 'schema theory' to advance the idea that immersion is bred of familiarity, as schemas are 'the building-blocks of information processing,

a cognitive framework that determines what we know about the world... (154, with reference to, Schank: 1990). In this model, texts that adhere to generic conventions are the most easily immersive, because they follow a pathway the reader/player expects, which can inform our understanding of the ways in which the *Beowulf* group leant into the intertextuality of their work. Due to the apparent safety of a text, a consumer can become immersed because little strenuous effort is required to access the text. The implication, therefore, is that immersion, and engagement, can only be achieved **if the text does not present an excessive challenge, or if a person has sufficient motivation to read around a text and encompass themselves in a wider context**. Based on the work in the sections above, the first nuance appears to apply more to immersion, while the latter suggests a direction for our initial thoughts on engagement to take.

In the model applied above, from an educational standpoint, it is engagement as an active, metacognitive state, that seems the most desirable state for students to achieve in a class, if this is the idea of *immersion* that is being bought into at the same time. As we have seen above, however, immersion is not passive, and as such we can see that immersion and engagement are states that can feed into one another in a cyclical relationship, where immersion's relationship with narrative can allow a student to feel 'at home' with a text well enough to feel able to repurpose and remake it. The model of engagement also appears to be insufficient to describe what a teacher might desire to see in a classroom.

As a model, Douglas and Hargadon's idea of immersion attempts to do more towards explaining *how* immersion occurs, adding a layer of rationalisation that exceeds Murray's and McMahan's. Though both McMahan, and Douglas and Hargadon cite Murray in their work, both redefinitions of immersion express a desire to move beyond understanding immersion as a form of perceptual submersion, with McMahan focusing on an involving narrative, and Douglas and Hargadon introducing the idea that it is elements within a narrative that secure an

immersive experience. Despite this, and despite the sense that an additional layer of engagement is suggested to describe a more nuanced relationship between subject and text, we only begin to get a sense of how the twin concepts might develop and feed into one another.

The work of both McMahan, and Douglas and Hargadon is helpful in expanding our understanding of what a textual experience can be, however, they focus on immersion in the figurative sense, so its potential power as a concept is diminished. By removing the idea of embodied experience in favour of diegetic focus, it seems that the idea of immersion is rendered hyperbolic or obsolete. To a certain degree, the issue raised here is a reflection on the nature of metaphors more generally, not just the idea of immersion as a metaphor. By labelling an experience as immersive, we are trying to find a term to explain what it is like to inhabit an alternative mode of being outside our usual everyday experience, which is insufficient for our purposes here.

Engagement, meanwhile starts to emerge as a creative state, akin to what Jenkins describes in his work on fan and participatory cultures (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 1999; Jenkins et al., 2006). It appears that engagement is the state of a motivated student: a person who is involved not only with the content of a lesson, but the contextual factors that surround it. They have a desire to know more about something - how it works, how it came to be. As will be seen through the additional theoretical layer we will later discuss, the ‘third text’, we will, however, argue that it is possible for even previously disengaged students to achieve this state, which will be particularly observable with the *Beowulf* case study, where the community of students forming around the canonical text saw all of the participants fully engaged in the act of creative repurposing.

If we return, here, to Derrida’s broader project of deconstructing the dualisms of Western Metaphysics, then we must note at this point the problems with proposing engagement as the privileged term, certainly in terms of education, of the twin concepts of

immersion/engagement. I have argued, and will continue to argue below, that immersion and engagement are a cyclical relationship, and mobilising both states is key to expanding English Literature study for secondary school students. Though the theorists noted above situate engagement as relational, though not necessarily paired, with immersion, for this project we now must develop what engagement means here, and justify why I argue the relationship between these two terms is functionally cyclical.

From a pedagogical perspective, it would be hard to argue that engagement is anything but desirable, but we need to modify the concept so that it becomes applicable to the classroom, rather than to Game Studies where it originates. Particularly for struggling or resistant learners, one has to consider what factors will develop an engaged state: how can texts be rendered familiar or safe, so these learners find the confidence to take ownership of them? Finding ways into a text that are supra-structural, hypertextual, and playful, as will be explored through the *Beowulf* project, have already proven to be successful. So, specifically to the teaching of English Literature, it is clear that working with broad narrative frames and simple character ideas is a starting point that can lead into engagement and then immersion, as well as centring texts that students have already encountered in informal settings, and genres that they already enjoy. Engagement, then, we will consider as a state whereby a subject moves beyond having a relationship with a text, and enters a phase of creation. The modes and resources with which a subject might create could be part of a target, for example studied texts, or they may be drawn from other texts within that subject's field of experience. There is also the potential for engagement to arise as part of shared experience within a formal or informal community, whereby the motivation a subject has comes from sharing what they are expressing with their peers.

The appeal of the idea of engagement that emerges above is that it has the potential to lead a previously resistant student to a place of feeling safe with a challenging text. This could then generate a state of immersion. Immersion in its previous passive sense would be more difficult to access for a resistant learner, though if, as I argue above, a student sees something of themselves reflected in a text, then they will be able to immerse themselves in it, for example if they can find genre references from games of television in the canon. This involvement has the potential to lead into a further state of engagement.

In the teaching of English, Media, and Drama, you can be immersed in a narrative, to enjoy it, to be consumed by it, and to be left with a trace of something that has fundamentally altered you. Furthermore, by becoming immersed in someone else's story, you are reaching a fuller understanding about a person outside yourself, or a culture that is not your own, stepping over the borders of liminality, thereby expanding your worldview. As you find something of yourself within a text, when you find something of that text inside yourself, you are able to contemplate yourself as containing the potential for something beyond what you already know. Entering an immersed state via engagement is also a powerful move, as a student can own elements of a text before fully entering the original, especially if the original was previously held to be too 'difficult.' The engaged student is then also empowered to create, breaking the perceived boundaries of a text.

Immersion and Engagement: Cyclical Literary Experience

Having reviewed different conceptualisations, of varying depth, of 'immersion' and 'engagement,' it is, of course, necessary to end this chapter by defining the way in which these terms will be applied and tested throughout the whole thesis.

When immersion is used in the rest of this project, it refers to an active relationship between person and text, whereby the person and the text are held together by a trace of one another; immersion requires some form of mediation; immersion involves a structure that is beyond the control of the person, but that they can exist safely with. The conditions for this state include:

1. A sense of safety or comfort in the space of 'reading' and in the text itself.
2. That the student is able to find themselves in some way reflected in the text.
3. The space for play of some manner of structure, most commonly narrative.
4. A shifted sense of presence.
5. The building of ownership and confidence that can lead beyond the narrative to engagement as a form of play within and around the text.

When engagement is used in the rest of this project, it refers to a metacognitive state where a person takes elements of a pre-existing text and repurposes them, where a person expands on or disrupts the boundaries of a text, where the creator takes control. The conditions for this state include:

1. A sense of ownership or control over the resources of the text, whether individually, or as part of a social group (as seen particularly in the *Beowulf* group).
2. A desire to create with and expand on the source text.
3. A sense of confidence that can lead to the comfort and safety required for the student to be (re)immersed in the text.

What these working definitions should make clear is that the categories of immersion and engagement are not mutually exclusive, nor are they linear. Each of these states can feed back into the other, which is suggestive that there are different ways of approaching the teaching of literature to students, and particularly to resistant learners. The suggestion that the terms is cyclical rather than linear is derive both from my broader teaching experience, and my initial experiences with the *Beowulf* group. The research undertake with the *Macbeth* group will be fundamental in confirming or evolving the definitions as they stand.

As the case studies will go on to show, for students who are not necessarily excited by the prospect of literary texts, activities promoting engagement before immersion can often be

the most productive way of securing student interest – or ‘engagement’ in its historic, casual sense.

4. Methodology

In the chapter above, progress towards the answering of the Research Questions was made through the refinement of the terms, ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement. The first two RQs, asking, *‘How can ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?’* And *‘What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?’* Have undergone an establishment phase through the conceptual theory work. The following methodology chapter will lay out how the theoretical work will be tested, along with how we can set about answering the third RQ, *‘How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?’*. As noted in the Introduction, this methodology will account for research completed as part of a Masters’ degree dissertation, and how this has been developed appropriately to fit within a doctoral research project.

MissionMaker and D.A.R.E.

The overall form of the original MA research inspiring this project, and the concept for the data collection, came from two projects involving my supervisor, Professor Andrew Burn, and second supervisor, Dr Bruno De Paula. Under the auspices of the UCL Knowledge Lab, D.A.R.E. (Digital Arts Research Education) - now re-launched as ReMAP (Research in Media,

Arts and Play) - and MAGiCAL - a UCL enterprise developing game-based software -, they worked on two literature-influenced computer game design projects, developing a game authoring software – MissionMaker – aimed at school students, and exploring the intersections between the mechanics of play and narrative. Consequently, some of the data generated by my student participants can also be found referenced in Burn’s publications, particularly *Literature, Videogames and Learning* (Burn, 2021). Discussion of de Paula’s work on developing MissionMaker and his studies of other cohorts using it can be found in his articles including, ‘*Exploring game grammars: a sociosemiotic account of young people’s game-making practices*’ and ‘*Playing Beowulf: Bridging computational thinking, arts and literature through game-making*’ (De Paula et al., 2018; De Paula, 2021; De Paula, 2023).

In the initial phase of their research, the wider researcher team used the literary text of *Beowulf* as a stimulus, creating the game authoring software to map onto details from the narrative, with the project summarised in the following terms,

Playing Beowulf was a Digital Transformations project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. It developed a game-authoring tool based on the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf*, for use by literature students in schools and universities, curators and library visitors. The games were shown at a final conference at the British Library on December 7, 2015, **Ludic Literature: Literary Games**. The keynote speaker was Professor Andrew Prescott: ‘*Reinventing Beowulf 1787-2015*’.

I, and my first cohort of students, originally participated in this project through my research for the dissertation for my MA in Digital Media, Culture, and Communication, and presented on the experience, along with a group of the student participants, at the *Reinventing Beowulf* conference. The work completed for this dissertation can be considered the direct inspiration for the design of the second case study outlined below. The data presented in this thesis includes student work and interviews included in my MA dissertation, but also new material.

The *Beowulf* study took the form of an extra-curricular club, run over two academic terms with a group (varying in number between five and twelve) of Year 9 and 10 students, commencing with a session led by Professor Burn and Dr Alison Gazzard. The project involved extensive making and remaking of *Beowulf* games by the students, using MissionMaker, and then led onto other creative work inspired by the canonical epic poem. As this study formed the basis of a digital media-focused dissertation at MA level, the design of the initial game design sessions was guided by Professor Burn, whilst the subsequent longer-term project grew organically as a form of practitioner ethnography, similar to the ethnographic subspecies described by Barton in relation to nursing practice (Barton, 2008). As the research occurred in my school of employment, there could not help but be overlap between my practice as a researcher and my practice as a teacher, and therefore my positioning in relation to the project inflected the way in which I was able to work naturally with students over a long period of time, gathering the diverse and interesting data set discussed below. Of course, in terms of ethical considerations, this also meant the project was double bound by both UCL regulations, and the expectations of the school regarding safeguarding practice.

The afterschool sessions were 60-90 minutes long, initially taking place in one of the school's computer labs. Some of the later sessions took place in ordinary classrooms to facilitate different kinds of creativity, particularly the creation of stop motion animation. Other than the student planning, reflective, and creative work collected as data, some of the sessions (where practical) were audio-recorded, and extensive fieldnotes were taken during and after the sessions. These data points were supplemented by semi-structured interviews, designed to encourage the students to reflect on their feelings about participating in the project. The quantity and breadth of student work collected transcended what was needed for an M-level dissertation, and the deep involvement of the students implied there was further research to be done in exploring how MissionMaker intersected with English studies.

For D.A.R.E., the *Playing Beowulf* project was followed by their *Playing Macbeth* project, which they publicised in the following terms,

The MAGiCAL team (Andrew Burn, Abel Drew and Bruno de Paula) have developed a game-authoring tool for Shakespeare's Macbeth. Based on the successful MissionMaker software, rebuilt in Unity during the Playing Beowulf project, this version incorporates characters, landscapes, objects and even cauldron ingredients for users to make satisfying digital games based on Shakespeare's play.

The big idea:

Most educational games are made on the assumption that the educators make the game for the students to play. Our approach is very different. Our software allows the students to make their own games, and in so doing, engage with the literary text in very different ways, draw on their own gaming culture, learning a little about game design, and also learn some principles of coding, such as Boolean logic.

What this meant in practical terms for this thesis was that I was able to capitalise on learning from the experience of *Playing Beowulf*, and define a case study that mapped onto both my own research focus – refining our understanding of immersion and engagement as they relate to literary texts - *and* the underlying principles of the wider *Playing Macbeth* project, as led by Professor Burn.

The design of MissionMaker, the game authoring software, is intended to balance teaching students about game design (which can lead to deeper engagement, as defined in the theory section of this thesis), but also to provide a different way for them to immerse themselves in a literary text. During the *Beowulf* study, some students found the technicalities of the software difficult, and others encountered bugs that prevented them fully realising their vision for their game, but persisted in attending the extra-curricular club, forging relationships with their peers, and creating written and visual work inspired by *Beowulf*. Overall, using MissionMaker as the central focus for the club was transformative, whether the students produced ‘meaningful’ games or not – the link of the challenging text to videogaming generated a sense of freedom for the students to take ownership over the text, in a manner I had not seen replicated in my normal practice of teaching literature. The technical difficulties (both bugs in

the software and poor-quality technical provision by the school) would also be formative in the technical side of designing the *Macbeth* project.

Furthermore, referring to MissionMaker as a ‘game-*authoring*’ software, as the project description copy above does, was a useful conceptualisation, as it not only tied my thinking to the ideas of multiliteracies outlined in the Literature Review, but also caused me to consider how multiple forms of authorship might be designed into the research. This would be helpful in addressing the third RQ, pertaining to how ‘*productive connections – academic third spaces – [can] be found between visual creative work ... and GCSE-style required writing...*’. Again, as noted in the Literature Review and Theory chapters, when terms like ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ are casually used in relation to written literary texts and student written work, it is not too much of an extension to draw parallels between students’ conventional writing inspired by a set text, and students *authoring* games to the same aim. The power of MissionMaker for encouraging students to become deeply involved in (multi)authorship implied an interrogation of what we mean by ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ that would be productive in testing and developing those concepts.

Building a carefully designed study to follow on from a piece of work completed at MA level was always going to be a challenging task, as the research design needed to evolve from the lessons learnt from the pilot study, however, the overwhelmingly positive experience of the first group of students demanded that the follow-up research take place. Taking game design as a starting point, necessarily due to my participation in the wider *Playing Macbeth* project, I considered the appropriate methods to allow me to build more ‘teacherly’ data points around student authorship of written work into my research, including options for students to create narrative or informative text, as well as inviting students to present and discuss their work to/with the class, and later in the form of semi-structured interviews.

Having learnt how to use the MissionMaker software myself for the original *Beowulf* study, and witnessing the specific technical difficulties the first students faced, meant that I already had a greater awareness of how to negotiate the things that might go wrong. My experience of the technical provision offered by the school also forewarned me that contingency for issues such as broken PCs had to be considered before the research took place. Eventually, I decided to expand the second case study to include a whole class (thirty-four children) of Year 10 students to increase the amount of data available, and direct students to specific sections of the text to use, in order to streamline the process for the initial class study day (detailed below). I also utilised set groupings or mixed ability (and engagement) levels, and shared PCs to offset some of the concerns noted above.

Before the onset of COVID-19, the case study outlined above was to be the first of at least two, charting a developmental relationship between MissionMaker and teaching Macbeth. However, when schools closed, students contacted about a potential online version of the case study felt unable to commit even to making games. This was understandable, given the uncertainties KS4 students were suddenly placed under, so the analytical focus of this study necessarily placed a stronger emphasis on the Beowulf project and the single class data generated before the national lockdowns, along with some additional interview transcripts from Microsoft Teams interviews conducted during the first (from May 2020) and third (from January 2021) lockdowns. Though it was not possible to track the project across multiple classes and terminal examinations, the structure of the in-class sessions would have remained the same.

Framing the school: environment, cohort

For the main case study for this thesis, the selection of students for the study was determined by three key factors: my knowledge of certain groups through being their teacher, the potential complexities of using the MissionMaker software, and relevance of the texts chosen by D.A.R.E. to certain age groups.

The MissionMaker software is accessible to KS3 students (ages 11-14), but I found after the *Playing Beowulf* study that students in KS4 (ages 14-16) were more able to utilise it fluently, so the students for the *Macbeth* study day were my Year 10 class of girls. These students would be studying *Macbeth* for their final GCSE Literature paper, so it was a natural fit for them to be part of the project.

The school itself is a large, Catholic comprehensive, comprised (at the time, though it is now mixed) of federated boys' and girls' schools, with an attached, mixed sixth form. The intake is non-selective, and as such the cohort includes children who will go on to attend top universities (historically including Oxford, Cambridge, and Princeton), but also students who follow alternative curricula to account for complex learning or behavioural needs. ICT provision in the school was less than ideal, so the planning of the case study to involve an element of group work was a practical necessity as it negated the likelihood of arriving in a computer room and some of the PCs not working properly. The unreliable nature of the PCs could also potentially limit students' ability to import audio and visual work into MissionMaker, despite MissionMaker having that functionality, so this was a further factor to account for in the research design. It also forms a point of reflexivity for the scale at which projects like this can be considered widely practical in secondary school. This is why it is important for this thesis to conceptualise ideas of 'immersion' and 'engagement' that are not linked to any one particular media.

The students in the target class, are from the girls' school, and though they are a notional 'top set' are reflective of the school, and wider community, environment in which I worked. The class of 34 students (as the then KS4 Coordinator for English I took on additional students who presented behavioural difficulties for other teachers) comprised students with a high level of prior attainment, but also students who I had identified as being at risk of not being likely to pass GCSE Literature (that is, attaining a 'standard pass' Grade 4 or above). The nature of the class were another factor to account for in the research design, as some students disengaged very easily, and would fall under the banner of 'resistant learners,' an idea explored in more detail below. The likely behavioural implications required a solid plan to offset any challenging behaviour: the aforementioned mixed-ability groupings, the clearly stated expected outcomes, and the carefully structured experience for the purpose of scaffolding.

Before the study day, the students would all need to have prior exposure to the text of *Macbeth*, through studying the narrative in lesson. This would be to the level of reading for baseline understanding of the plot, and through watching at least one complete film version, but not having yet engaged in any deep analysis. This pre-learning would be important, as students would need to be able to contextualise the scenes they would be assigned to make games of within a wider knowledge of the play's narrative structure. This front-loading of narrative content would also remove the barrier of students claiming to 'not understand' the scenes they would be assigned to make games out of. Pedagogically, one *could* make the case for setting the students the game-making task 'cold,' and requiring them to figure out the meaning of the scenes by thinking on their feet, and it is possible that the learning gained through their efforts in this model would be of huge benefit to their understanding of the text. However, in this particular school context, the risk of disengagement and therefore disruptive behaviour was too great, so this necessitated the pre-teaching.

Though free exploration of the text and the game-authoring software might in some instances be desirable, the situation of *Macbeth* as an examination text meant that a taking the students off timetable to do a game design study day would only be permissible if there was demonstrable educational benefit for the students. This was a practical trade-off with using KS4 students due to sit high-stakes exams. However, this constraint is also purposeful, as it forces this study to remain relevant to classroom teachers undergoing similar struggles with the restrictive nature of the National Curriculum. The data collected in the form of students' games and student writing frames discussion about the relevance of game design to formal education. It also offered the opportunity to broaden the idea of what a third space can be, with regards to RQ3.

The environment of the school in which this study takes place makes it even more vital that students are taught in ways which allow them to access the KS4 National Curriculum with some measure of quantitative success, due to the demographic comprising largely of certain key groups that underperform nationally in formalised examinations.

Based in Tower Hamlets, the school has a 'Pupil Premium' proportion of 28.4% girls (<https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Establishments/Establishment/Details/100978>) and 31.9% (<https://www.get-information-schools.service.gov.uk/Establishments/Establishment/Details/133289>) boys compared to a national average of 20.8 %. Students classified under this banner historically perform less well than their peers to a great extent, as, according to the 2015 data, '...33 per cent of children receiving free school meals obtained five or more good GCSEs, compared with 61 per cent of other children' (<https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/effects-poverty>).

Furthermore, the diverse intake of the cohort includes key ethnic categories of concern regarding attainment. White working-class British, Traveller, and Black Caribbean children, particularly those on ‘free school meals’ (FSM), are highlighted as a key concern because of their underperformance in formal examinations, in relation to their peers of other ethnicities, all of these ethnicities being represented in the target class.

Whilst children from Traveller families are seen to underperform on every measure, the following statistics, outlined by the Sutton Trust, for White British children also demonstrate the extreme crossover between FSM and academic under-attainment, compared to student potential demonstrated at KS2,

White British FSM (Free School Meals) boys achieve the lowest grades at GCSE of any main ethnic group, with just 24% achieving 5 A-C grades at GCSE, inc. English and maths. [...] White British FSM girls are also the lowest performing main female ethnic group, with 32% achieving the same measure. (https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Class-differences-report_References-available-online.pdf)*

Significantly, whilst these categories represent headline figures for the cohort, they still do not account for the wider issues of poverty surrounding a large number of the students. The average numbers of students below the poverty line in Tower Hamlets is 18,875, or around 31%, the highest in the UK, though this number is likely to be an understatement as 58% of children live in homes reliant on Housing Benefits (Data from 2015, latest available: https://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/Documents/Borough_statistics/Income_poverty_and_welfare/2015_Child_Poverty_Briefing.pdf). With these figures in mind, along with the immediate- and longer-term effects of COVID-19 (and these figures do offer a wider context to students being unwilling to engage with an online case study), it was important for me as a teacher first, and a researcher second, that the outcomes of this research not be limited to some children having had a day off timetable to ‘play computer games’. It is essential that the research process be designed to have wider benefit for the students involved, and that what is learnt from the process have the potential to improve outcomes for more students going forwards.

Securing progress for students is, of course, a significant theme in the Discourse of education, and teachers are generally driven to ensure the success of their students. However, poor results by class or cohort, or schools underperforming in league tables, can lead to punitive measures at school level (an OFSTED inspection being triggered) or teacher level (refusal of pay-progression), and so pressure for exam classes in secondary schools is always high. Yet, numerical data, though vital, only tells part of the story of school experience, and for this study, the contextualisation of the student participants will form part of the analysis and discussion chapters, as it is understood by this project that progress for an individual is not necessarily fully expressed by an examination grade. For some students, development of social skills, or the empowerment to use language with a sense of control is just as significant in improving their opportunities post-16, especially when they are understood to be ‘resistant’ learners. In reflection of this, the collected data will account for ‘student voice’ through recordings of them discussing their work with the class, and through the recording of semi-structured interviews after the process (which happened online due to the national lockdowns).

Even with careful planning, there is always the possibility, in a school setting, that students will fail to follow instruction, or that outcomes from an intervention will prove unexpected. As a teacher, accepting this as a reality of the research environment was necessary, and I approached the research day with an attitude of flexibility. The presence of ‘resistant learners’ in my class meant that I was prepared to have to improvise around things going ‘wrong’ outside of the forecast technical issues.

Resistant learners

There are many euphemisms used within teaching, but some of the most insidious are the phrases ‘resistant’ or ‘reluctant’ learner, and ‘disruptive’ learner. Considering the data on child poverty and underachievement provided above, it is perhaps unsurprising that there is often a correlation between students with high prior attainment at KS2 but apparent underachievement by KS4, and their categorisation as FSM. Furthermore, such a dip in attainment and status is often linked to students manifesting the behaviours of ‘resistant’ or ‘disruptive’ learners. This generalisation is not only derived from the above data, but also from my classroom experience at the target school, gained over several years of teaching there.

The methodology described throughout this chapter needs to account for the reality such ‘resistant learners,’ but also allowing them to fully access the literary texts the projects focus on. It is first necessary to define what such a term means, however, lest it be used too casually herein, and to reflect on how these behaviours could affect the outcomes, usefulness, and legitimacy of this study, especially when we look towards the extent to which the results can inform future pedagogy.

Protheroe describes ‘resistant’ or ‘reluctant’ learners as those who, ‘...avoid challenges, don’t complete tasks, and are satisfied to “just get by”’ (Protheroe, 2004, p.6), which is very different to the more emotive descriptions often attached to students who are actively disruptive by the staff who work with them. ‘Disruptive’ behaviours can be violent and are more likely to derail a lesson than resistant behaviours, which are passive, and mostly impact upon the child themselves (Lawrence, Steed and Young, 1984). Some students in the *Beowulf* study, and several in the target class of the main case study fall under the description of ‘resistant learners.’ If the projected follow-on case study had not been disrupted by the first of the COVID-19 lockdowns, the next step would have been to try a similar process with a ‘behavioural’ or ‘sink’

set of boys, grouped together for their explicitly disruptive behaviour across the school. With the main case study that *was* completed successfully, however, the careful scaffolding of the study day was essential in order for the day to work for everyone, without any resistant behaviours escalating to disruptive ones. This highlights aspects of the reconceptualised notions of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ laid out in the following chapter, and as such would be a useful point of reflection in planning further research.

Pre-learning the basic narrative of *Macbeth* before the study day allowed for a common point of entry for all students, as this removed a comprehension barrier. As the students would have to learn how to use MissionMaker, it was important that there not be too many additional challenges to make the process prohibitively difficult. The pre-learning would also allow for students to feel ‘safe’ that the day was relevant to their academic needs (knowledge of a key text), and that they would be able to access the content. For the more academic students, who were vocally dubious about the value of the study day, this clear link to their prior learning was also designed to be reassuring, and to provide a concrete relationship to something that was more familiar to them. As mentioned elsewhere in this chapter, though the focus on graded academic achievement is not unproblematic, and in the environment of the target school, there was a prevalence of an exam-focused mindset, particularly in the more academically able students. It felt, from a teacherly perspective, that this transactional model of education displaced the students’ love of learning in favour of a drive towards ‘good grades.’ This mindset had to be acknowledged in the research design, or key students in the target class would be likely to display disruptive behaviour in response to their perception of their time being wasted.

The other predictable avenues for reluctance or disruption were technological and social. As mentioned above, the IT provision in the target school is not particularly strong, and the MissionMaker software does not always behave as it is expected to. Again, as already stated, arranging for controlled groups of students negated the hardware issues, and the

presence of Professor Burn and Dr De Paula was of great help with negotiating the use of the software, especially as it meant there were more adults on hand in the room. The social aspects, meanwhile, were harder to account for, as some members of the class group could be quite emotionally volatile (for example with friends ‘falling out’ due to social media posts). The careful division of groups assisted in being able to manage student relationships by separating both friends and sources of potential conflict.

Additionally, Protheroe argues that, ‘Students’ beliefs about their capability to accomplish meaningful tasks—known as self-efficacy—directly affect their motivation to learn.’ She highlights the particular importance of this self-belief, arguing that, ‘Self-efficacy starts with students believing that what they are working on is meaningful’. Taking this, and the experiences of the *Beowulf* study, into consideration, the pre-teaching of *Macbeth* would be a necessary starting point for the research design, as it allowed me, as the teacher, to build a strong link between the GCSE set text and videogame design. She goes on to argue that, ‘Another way teachers can make learning relevant to students is to allow reasonable choices in their assigned activities,’ As this allows for students to feel as if they have ownership over their learning (Protheroe, 2004). This can be accounted for by allowing students a degree of choice in the tasks that they complete during the *Macbeth* study day and the tasks that come after.

Some elements of the study day needed to be inflexible – that the games focus on set scenes from the original playscript of *Macbeth*, being the main case in point - however the written work inspired by it can take the form of narrative or transactional writing, as both forms are relevant to the students’ GCSEs (both their Literature GCSE for the *Macbeth* content, and their Language GCSE for the creative writing skills). Allowing students the freedom to choose *how* they used their allotted *Macbeth* scenes to inspire their games was also an example of how ‘choice’ was consciously built into the study day. As can be seen in the data and analysis chapters of this project, this particular opportunity for choice proved to be both interesting and

highly successful, as it allowed for a greater interplay between *Macbeth* and each individual students' interests and cultural influences, inflected by their 'third texts' and own senses of self-identity.

Furthermore, as this case study was overt, the students were aware that the study day was part of my own research project. In its own way, this led to an increased level of engagement with some students, as academic research is not something with which they were familiar. The discussions about what research can be, and what its purpose is, are not included in this project, as they stray too far away from the focus of the research, but they were a point of reflection for me as a researcher about how research can be communicated more clear both to stakeholders, and to a wider public in the form of academic outreach.

As I have implied at various points above, there were factors of the *Macbeth* project that were always going to be out of my control – technology, unexpected instances of poor student behaviour – and there were factors that no one could have foreseen and planned for – COVID-19. These influences, combined with the immense complexity of researching students and learning in a large secondary school, in a deprived location, means that it is necessary to consider the data collection and outcomes through an appropriate framework that accounts for the 'messy' nature of such work. As Law has argued, '...simple clear descriptions don't work if what they are describing is not itself very coherent...' (Law, 2004), and what will be described in the following chapters is far from 'clear.'

Framing the Mess

There are schools that are broadly ordered places, and there are school years that pass without any large-scale disruption of note. The school environment in which this research took place, however, was not a highly ordered one, seeing several changes of Headteacher during

the relatively short span of the research process. Furthermore, during the research process, the ‘lockdowns’ associated with the emergence of COVID-19 occurred, changing the academic pathways of students across England, and so the period was, for the school, significantly disrupted indeed. Both of these influences mean that the methodology described above and below needed to be adapted in response to factors beyond my control as a researcher, with a high degree of reflexivity.

Even in a ‘normal’ school year, an institution whose cohort is drawn from one of the most deprived boroughs in the country, whose students encounter myriad difficulties never dreamed of by more affluent peers, would not provide neat, orderly data for a research project – the students’ experiences are too diverse for that to be the case, and there are far too many factors pushing and pulling the participants on any given day. It has proven one of the key difficulties for this project, therefore, to find methods appropriate to finding reliable data in a rapidly changing, constantly shifting environment.

As framework for describing the challenging conditions in which this research has taken place, John Law’s *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* is useful for its discussion of the realities of ethnographic research. In it, he argues that,

To do [ethnographic research] we will need to unmake many of our methodological habits, including: the desire for certainty; the expectation that we can usually arrive at more or less stable conclusions about the way things really are; the belief that as social scientists we have special insights that allow us to see further than others into certain parts of social reality; and the expectations of generality that are wrapped up in what is often called ‘universalism’. But, first of all we need to unmake our desire and expectation for security. (Law, 2004, p.9)

This stance describes a key step in the process of modifying this project not only during the period where COVID-19 closed schools, but also when ‘normal’ school life disrupted the planned data gathering. Law’s work here is important as it acknowledges the messiness of trying to gather data in social research. His perspective is particularly valid for research in schools, as not only are schools so different from one another, but the potential research participants within schools are subject to so many different influences, predicting a response

to any given research design is very difficult to do, even when the researcher is also an employee in the school/research environment.

Similarly to Law, Geertz argued that “Nothing has done more, I think, to discredit cultural analysis than the construction of impeccable depictions of formal order in whose actual existence nobody can quite believe.” Which resonates with Law’s work in the sense that he highlights the messiness of what analyses of culture try to make meaning from (Geertz, 2017). The argument here, that producing a sanitised version of findings on any particular culture creates disbelief in the validity of those findings, is again highly relevant to data gathered when researching an aspect of the education sector. In my discussion chapters, I will not be seeking to make any grand claims about the universality of the experiences of student participants, nor will I be arguing that the case studies outlined below form the template for any revolutions in secondary English pedagogy. The second case study particularly, which had to be modified due to the first lockdown, could not be seen through to its originally planned ending, and so remains open-ended in its conclusions. What will be drawn out, however, is an idea of what ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ are, and how they can be fostered, whether through games or otherwise, within the practice of the ordinary classroom teacher – the foci of RQs 1 and 2.

During the pandemic particularly, there was little sense of pattern or security for students, causing teachers as individuals and school as institutions to reconsider what a school is and what teaching is. As a teacher researching her own school environment, I found that predicting how students would respond to, or engage with, any kind of intervention virtually impossible. There is a danger then, that attempting to frame this research as orderly and ‘smooth’ would erase the reality of the experience, instead presenting only the artificial order of the research method, as Law argues, “The argument is no longer that methods discover and depict realities. Instead, it is that they participate in the enactment of those realities.” (Law, 2004). It is important for this project that the delivery of the findings is properly reflective of

the research environment. Due to the ‘mess’ surrounding the research period, it is necessary to restate at this point, that the resulting data for this project would always already only be a starting point for further research, generating almost as many questions as it answers. The manifestation of immersion and engagement in students, even without the irregularities to the research process created by COVID-19, is highly subjective, and would most likely vary according to student experience, even under normal circumstances. It was hoped during this research project, however, that it would be possible to observe commonalities in the conditions for ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ that allow for such states to arrive, so some generalisations can be proposed.

Mellor, in researching his own research process, whilst working in educational psychology relates that there are further difficulties a researcher can encounter whilst working with data generated from their line of work: he reflects that his own methodologies had to adapt and change over time as the rigors of fulltime work do not lend themselves to time for the detailed planning of an ‘extra-curricular’ research project (Mellor, 2001). He also acknowledges the difficulties with maintaining a logical, linear project progression, as well as questioning the nature of ‘data’ and ‘knowledge’ when the data collected is qualitative (in his case in the form of reflective journals).

The demands of teaching can be intense and time consuming. As well as my ‘ordinary’ role as a teacher of secondary school and A Level English and Media, I commenced the PhD research process with two ‘middle leadership’ roles: ‘Second in Charge of’ (2i/c) English, and More Able Coordinator for KS4 and KS5 (a whole school, rather than a Faculty responsibility), so my workload could be quite severe. An example of this during the COVID-19 period would be completing ongoing reworkings of the English KS4 curriculum to respond to multiple changes and inconsistencies to the Department for Education’s response to how the GCSEs would work for the cohort completing Year 11 in 2021. By the end of the PhD writing-up

period, I was both Head of Faculty for English, and Head of Department for Media, under a new Headteacher, in a rapidly changing school with serious issues of teacher retention and recruitment. As such, I, like Mellor, had to rework and reflect on my methodology in order to keep some control over the messiness of my job versus my data gathering, with both representing serious demands on my attention.

Furthermore, the qualitative, subjective, 'soft,' nature of the data I would be gathering meant that I need to consider how I will be able to justify the validity of the data, and how it could be pulled together to create some manner of original 'knowledge.' The variety of qualitative data would have to be open to change, embracing the messiness of lived school experience, as my teaching experience and knowledge of my classes has given me realistic expectations regarding garnering consistent student work without some form of coercion. The many factors that affect students – home, friendships, self-confidence, perceived academic ability, to name a few – mean that student work as a data point would always potentially be inconsistent, though this does not mean without value. As Law notes, qualitative data is rich and complex, which has to be accounted for in its analysis (Law, 2004).

In discussing the collection of qualitative data, Bryman suggests the process generally follows the pattern of: a posing of general RQs, the subsequent identification of sites and subjects for the research, the collection of data, the interpretation of data, consequent conceptual and theoretical work, the refinement of the RQs in light of the previous steps, collection of further data, leading to further interpretation, and onwards in a cyclical process until the researcher is satisfied that the writing-up can commence (Bryman, 2012). As I have already signposted, the structure of this project does not follow such a conventional trajectory and has much 'mess' to account for. Here we can turn to Webb et al.'s version of triangulation (Webb et al., 1966) to argue that the number of different forms of data collected – interviews, recordings, a research diary, student-made games, student writing, students illustrations –

across two different cases means that analysis can be cross referenced across a multiplicity of sources. Likewise, a sense of ‘trustworthiness’ can be drawn from meeting Guba and Lincoln’s four conditions: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Guba and Lincoln, 1985; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Bryman, 2012). The credibility of the data can arise from its triangulation, and also a prolonged engagement in the field due to my research being in my place of employment. The transferability, though the term sits uncomfortably close to ideas surrounding quantitative data, can be unveiled through its ‘thick description’. Dependability is a more difficult aspect to demonstrate, as auditing is not built into the methodology here, but Burn’s writing on the same data from the same student does, to an extent, fulfil this condition (Burn, 2023). Finally, the confirmability of the data can, again, be tested against its triangulation, but also through my foregrounded reflexivity as a practitioner-researcher (Guba and Lincoln, 1985). Here, though, it is necessary to unpack the notion of practitioner research, and ethnography-as-method more explicitly, as I have noted my positionality in relation to the field of study, without formalising it as part of the method.

Ethnographic research, practitioner research, teacher research

The research process – the framework in which I will be operating - of the main section of this thesis is an overt ethnography in a closed setting (the school), but within this broad area, definitions of practitioner research and, specifically, teacher research need to be considered.

If we take Brewer’s following definition of ethnography as our starting point,

Ethnography is the study of people in naturally occurring settings or ‘fields’ by methods of data collection which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally. (Brewer, 2000, p.312)

We cannot help but caveat this explanation with the fact of my employment within the school environment within which I am conducting my research: it is very difficult for me to distance myself from the subjects of my research as they are my students, and I am invested in their well-being and their academic success. This should not be viewed as a detraction from the research, however, as it is a strong motivating factor for the research to be conducted in a way that offers a return of benefit for the student participants. My research certainly fulfils the criteria of ‘participating directly in the setting,’ but by virtue of this (at the time) being my formal means of employment, I would have done so anyway, research process or not. As such, a simple definition of ‘ethnography’ does not sufficiently cover the framework in which my research takes place.

When we look at the idea of practitioner research as defined by Fox et al, ‘Being a practitioner researcher is not the same as being an academic researcher. The practitioner researcher approaches research and embeds research within practice in ways that an academic researcher cannot.’ We can see that the emphasis is on practitioner researchers using their work to bring about some kind of change within their work environment (Fox, Martin and Green, 2007). This goes beyond the traditional idea of ethnography, and as I am conducting research involving my students, relevant to my wider practice as a teacher and a ‘middle leader,’ I would expect that my findings will go on to influence both my own practice and my leadership of others. This project does not sufficiently fulfil the criteria of being ‘action research,’ however, as it is too exploratory to have a preconceived concrete change to make.

Focusing in on education, when we look at Burton and Bartlett, and Menter et al.’s guidance specifically pertaining to teachers as researchers, we see them forward an argument for the importance of teacher practitioner researchers to produce work that informs the development of the profession as a whole, providing necessary evidence to influence policy, and those making recommendations at an academic level (Burton and Bartlett, 2004; Menter

et al., 2011). My contribution to the body of knowledge relating to my own practice includes the redefinition and exploration of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ which should offer clarity and specificity to the terms, and suggest ways in which it is possible to encourage these states in the teaching of literary texts. As will be seen in the case studies, the pedagogy around the use of game design in literature teaching is also a novel contribution through the extent to which the participants learnt from it. Again, then, my situation as a researcher in my own school can be seen as a strength of the research, because I am invested in my project as something that can create a more preferable and profitable learning environment for my students, but also, potentially for other teachers’ students as well.

In order to be a reflexive ethnographic researcher, it is important to acknowledge the inherent issues with researching in an environment you are part of, with subjects who you know. As Gray notes, in a project, ‘[reflexivity] actively interrogates its research categories ... [and] is open and genuinely exploratory...’ (Gray, 2003). To be properly reflexive, a researcher needs to be in constant dialogue with their methods, findings, and the assumptions that they are making. As noted above, the suitability of my research methods has been (necessarily) under constant review. In my analysis of data, each point will have to be subjected not only to initial analysis, but also a reflexive review to test if what I am arguing holds up under the process of triangulation.

As professional bias could be a concern for this project, my analysis necessarily demands this focused reflexivity, asking if my reading of artefacts produced by students is likely to be influenced by my pre-held knowledge and expectations of them, and the elements of my practice that relate to ‘marking’ work. I will need to interrogate if my relationship with the school and the students compromise the validity of my analysis. Additionally, there is the danger that I could overwrite groupings of students in my class as separate subcultures, as I

would expect teenagers with different interests and background influences to be grouped in certain ways (Gray, 2003; Yin, 2003). To counter this potential issue, all individual student-produced artefacts will be analysed through the same processes of close semiotic reading and Discourse analysis before any conclusions are proposed. Being aware of potential biases means that I will be able to evaluate my conclusions before finalising them. Having multiple data points to triangulate will also aid in this process, as will having the *Beowulf* study and the *Macbeth* study to cross-reference. The multiple sources of data mean that I will automatically have to challenge and assumptions I hold, as any contrasts or outliers will be clearly visible.

Furthermore, in writing about ethnographic research, there is reference made to the (not unproblematic) phrase ‘going native.’ This describes the state where a researcher becomes too involved in their environment, and loses sight of their ‘being a researcher’ (Bryman, 2012). As a teacher-researcher, this is likely to be particularly difficult as I am, in effect, already ‘native.’ In response to this dual responsibility, it will be important to maintain a clear research plan, and to refer back to the research questions, in order to keep this project on track. As Geertz notes,

The locus of study is not the object of study. Anthropologists don't study villages (tribes, towns, neighbourhoods...); they study in villages. You can study different things in different places, and some things—for example, what colonial domination does to established frames of moral expectation—you can best study in confined localities. But that doesn't make the place what it is you are studying. (Geertz, 2017, p.22)

The key message that can be taken from this is that the location of myself within the school is not what is key within the study, it is the research and what it is focused on.

However, during the period of disruption caused by COVID-19, the distinction between teacher and researcher became even more complex to negotiate as all working shifted to online. At this point there was little division between the spheres of teaching work, research work, and home life, as virtually all interactions occurred through a screen. Additionally, as the Department for Education (DfE) mandated the requirement for GCSEs to be assigned by

teachers (Teacher Assessed Grades or TAGs) it was necessary to shift my focus to this particular area of my work, and away from research, as my primary focus was to ensure students were assigned fair grades to allow their passage onto some form of Post-16 study. To counter this significant disruption, all discussion and analysis chapters were redrafted after school life had returned to a more normal state, so that a consistency and professional distance in tone could be assured.

Developing an ethnographic framework: case study as format

The main framework for the data collection element of this thesis will be the pair of case studies already outlined above. If we define a case study as ‘a detailed and intensive analysis of a single case,’ with a ‘case’ referring to, ‘a location, such as a community or organisation.’ (Bryman, 2012), or as, ‘an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the “case”) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident,’ (Yin, 2003) then this clearly, retroactively, describes the terms by which the *Beowulf* study data can be defined. It also successfully describes the projected data gathering method of the *Macbeth* study day (outlined in more detail below), though the description is less befitting the combining of the two within one project, without a refocusing of what the ‘case’ is – for this project, the two study groups will be understood as separate case studies, both exploring ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ within the wider school environment – and an acknowledgement that the triangulation of data from these particular case studies means that the whole project should be understood as longitudinal.

Both the extra-curricular student groups and the whole class, can be understood as typical (or for Bryman, ‘exemplifying’) cases of student groups within the cohort of the specific school in question, both in terms of their diversity of academic attainment, their social

backgrounds, and their ethnicities. With typical or common cases, Yin suggests, ‘the objective is to capture the circumstances and conditions of an everyday situation—again because of the lessons it might provide about the social processes related to some theoretical interest’ (Yin, 2003; Bryman, 2012). For this study, the ‘theoretical interest’ underpinning the case studies was generated after reflection on the data from the original MA dissertation, when I explored pre-existing theoretical work on ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ which went onto form the basis of the preceding theory chapter. The theory preceding the methodology, data gathering and analysis chapters, creates an unusual structure for this thesis, and moves the research firmly away from being described as a form of grounded theory.

Whilst defining the possible relationship between case studies and theory, Yin advises,

The theory or theoretical propositions that went into the initial design of your case study, ... will have formed the groundwork for your analytic generalization(s). Alternatively, a new generalization may emerge from the case study’s findings alone. In other words, the analytic generalization may be based on either (a) corroborating, modifying, rejecting, or otherwise advancing theoretical concepts that you referenced in designing your case study or (b) new concepts that arose upon the completion of your case study. (Yin, 2003, p.48)

In terms of this particular longitudinal study, everything that is being explored necessarily links to the concepts of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ whether this is supporting, developing, or challenging my redefinition of the terms. Their exploration was central to the formation of the research questions driving this thesis - *How can immersion and engagement be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?, What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?, and Can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?* - and so these terms were redefined through the theory chapter.

The focus on these concepts, as noted elsewhere, was inspired by observations made during the research for my MA dissertation. In designing the second case study for this thesis, the *Macbeth* study day and follow up work with the Year 10 class, therefore, consideration had

to be given to how the states of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ might manifest, and how they might be observed, building on how they were implied in the extra-curricular setting during the *Beowulf* project. As well as this, the underlying idea of what could count as a ‘third space’ (and a third text) meant that I would have to return to this concept constantly throughout the process.

The kinds of student work that might be organically developed during the case study were also planned for - and are described in more detail below, but included written and visual plans, images from the videogames themselves, and narrative or descriptive work inspired by the game-making process - in order to chart the ‘third space’ (in its more metaphorical form) between visual and written work queried in the research questions (Potter and McDougall, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2008). It was important, in terms of maintaining student ‘buy in,’ however, that the tasks set retained a clear link to the status of *Macbeth* as a GCSE text, and that the process still feel like a ‘classroom’ project so that the findings could be linked, in some small way, back to normal teaching practice, and the students felt as if they had benefited academically from the process (Cook-Sather, 2018). Whilst the focus on academic achievement can be viewed as problematic, in this particular school environment, the exam focused mindset is prevalent, and as such needed to be factored into the research design. However, whatever is observed during the process will be anchored by the foregrounding of the theoretical framework the cases will test.

By allowing for comparison between the two case studies, and tracking student work beyond the initial study day for the *Macbeth* group, my initial redefinition of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ can be challenged and therefore developed, completing the circuit suggested in the reference to Yin above. The fact that there is data for a whole class of students for the *Macbeth* group is also of great use because, though theoretical conclusions will be ‘generalised,’ they will be generalised from enough diverse data points to have some validity.

These concepts can then be used to suggest further study, in contribution to academic research of student engagement. Furthermore, mapping the design of this case study onto established ideas in the areas of multimodality, multiliteracy, and third spaces means that the research builds on credible, established fields of research that have already long benefited academic researchers and teachers (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Kress and Leeuwen, 2001; Potter and McDougall, 2017).

Data gathering – methods and rationale

For Wyse et al. there are generally two approaches teacher-researchers take in their observations of school phenomena and their subsequent data gathering. Firstly, and perhaps most obviously, teachers conducting research will often choose to adopt, ‘... qualitative approaches for studying classrooms...’ and will use, ‘an unstructured, participatory and non-interventional approach in order to capture the insider perspective... [because school] social situations are unique and so [teachers] are interested in studying classroom processes rather than outcomes.’ Teachers adopting this strategy are also concerned with maintaining the naturalness of the classroom setting, so that the normal classroom dynamics remain undisrupted. The contrasting research methods are more quantitative, and involve data gathering that can be used in statistical analysis of a given phenomenon, though it is highlighted that classroom teacher-researchers are sometimes less comfortable with this kind of number-driven research (Wyse et al., 2017). While this study is concerned with the classroom environment, however, an intervention in the form of videogame-making will be taking place, so it is not simply the case that the research is observational, though we do not go as far as creating a piece of action research. The case studies therefore occupy a liminal space between pure ethnographic observation and driven action research, which is reflective of both my position in the school (middle- rather than senior leadership) and my interest in how third

spaces and third texts bring to bear on student experiences, as noted in RQ3 pertaining to how third spaces can be both liminal and productive.

Instead, as has already been outlined in the chapter so far, this study is a longitudinal ethnography, utilising two case studies, and as such the data gathering is exclusively qualitative (Keeves, 1987; Watts, Bailey and Li, 2019). As the case studies will be used to explore the concepts of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ it is more productive to reflect on these ideas qualitatively rather than try to quantify them in a way that is artificial. Of course, these concepts could become linked to numerical data when a students’ relationship with texts is mapped onto their academic progress, which is tracked over time via their attained grades, though pinning progress to any single teacher-intervention is problematic. A better understanding of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ should make it possible to adapt teaching strategies surrounding English Literature to improve attainment outcomes, however that is not a demonstrable, reliable, data point or focus for a project of this scope and scale: this would be an area for further study.

Considering what data does fall within the parameters of this thesis, we have two broad sets: the historic *Beowulf* data and the data that will be gathered during the *Macbeth* study. During the *Beowulf* study, the data gathered at the time can be grouped into the following forms:

- Student planning work, including projected choices of music
- Student games/partial games
- Student illustrations
- Student writing in English and in Spanish
- Student presentations
- Transcripts of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews
- Field notes/a research diary
- Audio recordings or natural interactions between students during the sessions

Though these artefacts were generated through moments that were self-consciously part of a research process, their collection occurred organically, as would naturally transpire in any classroom or extra-curricular club in dialogue with students, and can be understood as evidencing a particular student subculture within the wider ‘lived culture’ of the school (Gray, 2003). The data yielded from this study was rich in detail, and open for analysis in much greater depth, and with a different focus, than took place in the original dissertation it was completed for. The subsequent planning of the pedagogical aspects of the *Macbeth* case study has allowed for the collection of student work (and their feelings about their work) that is equally available for an analysis in the manner of ‘thick description’ (Geertz, 2017).

The data gathering methods for this thesis, completed within the wider ethnographic role in which I was to be operating were to be the same as for the *Beowulf* study: student planning documents, student games, student writing (students being asked to choose between a narrative or transactional written response to the games they make), and transcripts of semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, along with recordings of students introducing and talking about their games and the design process.

By the end of the *Macbeth* study, all of these data forms were successfully gathered. In the spirit of adaptability and reflexivity, this data was supplemented with two sets of later interviews with two of the students whose work will be the focus of a later chapter, which occurred during lockdown and after the research design had evolved. The latter interviews involved the students offering a commentary on two of the original games. It also offered an insight into the ideas of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ from the perspective of students who were having to contend with those very things whilst ‘learning from home.’

The variety of data points is significant for this research, as, in order to triangulate lived student experience, it is necessary to not only observe their working, but also to hear their own thought process regarding their work, and to see how what they have learnt is retained and

transformed. In many respects, this is not just the work of the ethnographic researcher, but also that of the ordinary classroom teacher. It is vital to know your students, to adapt to their needs, and to ensure that they leave school having been successful in a manner appropriate to them – although as teachers there is the additional pressure of having to account for quantitative student progress in terms of their final GCSE grades. The collection of instances of ‘student voice’ prevents the data for this project from being entirely teacher-centric, and has the potential to challenge any preconceptions I came to the research with (Cook-Sather, 2018). The breadth of data, however, also brings with it additional challenges in terms of effective methods of analysis.

Analytic methods: semiotics, Discourse analysis, and webs of meaning

Given the richness of the data set available to work with for this project there are several potential ways of structuring analysis around it. In his work on ethnographic research, Brewer suggests that analysis proper should begin with data management (organising data into manageable units), be coded, be subjected to content analysis, then qualitative description, before patterns are established, a classification system of ‘open codes’ be developed, before a final exploration of ‘negative cases’ (Brewer, 2000). Other theorists, as overviewed by Bryman, suggest that there is a need for more detailed steps in this process of data review, and a more conscious justification required for any identified emerging themes, in order to manage a rigorous process of thematic analysis (Bryman, 2012). The development of this project over the historic *Beowulf* and new *Macbeth* case studies means that the data has been subjected to

different forms of organisation, as I have developed in competency as a researcher from M-level to doctoral-level. Consequently, attempting to apply the process of thematic analysis over two quite different bodies of data would not necessarily result in a coherent picture, as it could force the creation of codes, where there is actually dissimilarity. The amount of visual data would also make coherent thematic analysis unreasonable complex, though there has been movement in the field towards broadening the ways in which the method can be applied.

Instead, once the data has been organised by case study and student-text-type, it will be initially unpacked through an investigation of multimodal semiotics (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Bezemer and Kress, 2015) using the four strata model outlined in Kress and van Leeuwen's *Multimodal Discourse* (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001) and Burn's iteration of the three communicative metafunctions, outlined below (Burn, 2021). Around this framework will be deployed a wider acknowledgement of how 'webs of meaning' and thick description can build a more complex picture (Geertz, 2017). Broader ideas will then be explored through the lenses of Discourse analysis, to situate the individual case study participants in a broader context, as will be outlined below.

Before the analytical frameworks are discussed in any detail, it is first necessary to pause and consider the proposed combination of methods overall. In order to defend the proposed methods of analysis occurring within an ethnographic study, a move some would disagree with (Dicks et al., 2011), it is helpful to note Dicks et al's and Kress' discussion of the possible overlaps between the two spaces (creating a research third space in the process).

Ethnography has long dealt with forms of data that would naturally be considered 'multimodal,' as so much of human communication occurs across more than one mode. However, the accusation levelled at ethnographic research is that it has rarely managed multimodal data in a sufficiently rigorous manner (Dicks et al., 2011). Kress recognises that

the work of Social Semiotics introduces rigour to the analysis of sign-making, but goes onto suggest that this sign-making occurs within a community. This is where we can argue for the coexistence of Social Semiotics and ethnography – ethnography seeks to understand the community in which signs are being made (Kress, 2011). This nesting of multimodality within ethnographic research is the structure this thesis will adopt.

As we have already noted, the Social Semiotics of language also play out in visual forms, informing us that language is not the sole means of communication, as Kress and van Leeuwen note that, ‘...modes become shaped in response to *Discourse*, where Discourse itself is the effect of the socially shaped design practices.’ In other words, the modes used to represent ideas and communicate with an audience are shaped by wider society, but cyclically, design also shapes the social sphere (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001, Ch.1). For young people, whilst they are still learning the critical skills required to negotiate *all* of the modes of communication, they need to build successful lives in the world outside of school, which means a deeper vulnerability to the signs that wider society ascribes to them, and potential a lack of wisdom with regards the modes they adopt to communicate things about themselves. As Kress and van Leeuwen have also signalled, communication centres around being able to make yourself understood in different contexts, so for students, there is a real need to be exposed to different grammars so they are apprenticed in when and how to use them (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). The code switching between game design and exam-style writing can be seen a useful form of rehearsal for this, as students have to consciously make creative/linguistic choices based on their ideas about ‘appropriateness’ (RQ3).

Videogame design works across different modes, of course, so the data analysis must reflect this process, as well as capturing written work and interviews, meaning that Social Semiotics, encompassed by the field of multimodality is a natural form of analysis to adopt. As

Bezemer and Kress note in relation to educational research specifically, ‘learning is evidenced in every sign produced, not by a pre-defined, selective subset of signs,’ and I would not be able to get a full sense of the experience of the target students in the case study without looking at all of the different areas of their sign-making (Bezemer and Kress, 2015). It would be disingenuous to cut out elements of students’ design work, as it would not allow for the whole picture of the experience of the case studies, including elements that were chaotic or messy. Nor would limiting the data set allow for a ‘thick description’ of the student outcomes of the project (Bryman, 2012).

Additionally, the linkages between multimodality and social semiotics, the argument, via Halliday, that, ‘the meanings made in the course of education ... are intrinsically connected to the social interactions and institutions in which makers of meaning take part...’ (Wyse et al., 2017) adds another layer to the data for this project, as it also highlights the importance of cross-referencing different students’ ‘work’ with one another to see how their relationships with text and creative production connect within their micro- school communities. The triangulation of data across the two case studies could also allow for analysis of commonalities between the different year groups’ approaches to the texts and videogame design, however the grouping of student designs around particular texts, either *Beowulf* or *Macbeth*, will allow for deeper exploration of what effect the different pre-teaching or textual introductory methods had on student receptions of each text. The separation of the analysis and discussion of the two studies into separate chapters allows for assumptions made of the *Beowulf* group’s outcomes to be tested by the outcomes for the *Macbeth* cohort. Additionally, as the data points outlined above are so various in nature, it is important to define a clear process for analysing them, beyond leaning on semiotics. It is the work of this subsection to define a framework for tying the data points together to generate knowledge or meaning. Moreover, the identification and exploration of ‘negative cases’ may be particularly important for this study in order to secure its credibility,

rather than viewing videogame design as a panacea for the limitations of the National Curriculum (Bryman, 2012).

The social aspects of the different modes students use to communicate with will be just as interesting to this study as the grammars of these modes. Different modal grammars can be analysed in terms of the effectiveness of communication and the author's intentions, certainly, but the influences that act upon the students' modal and grammatical choices will be informative in terms of how the students have connected with the starting-point texts, and how their individual circumstances have shaped what they have created. Furthermore, as Wyse et al. note, 'contemporary classrooms ... are increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, including learners from many minority groups, ... who may be less familiar with the dominant language and cultural practices in society.' (Wyse et al., 2017) This is an important nuance in the discussion of modalities and grammars, as students from different backgrounds, whether in terms of class, ethnicity, religion, or something else, arrive to the school environment with different sets of semiotic resources at their disposal. Student interviews will be particularly important in light of this diversity, as it will allow students to express the different factors that influence their thinking and creative direction. The diversity of the target school's cohort additional means that the recognition of language as social and contextualised will be key to drawing meaningful conclusions from the data.

Social Semiotics as a field is again useful to note here, as it provides a framework for working with visual student work without becoming decoupled from traditional understandings of 'reading' and 'writing', which broadens the kind of data that can be explored using one consistent method. Burn and Parker argue that, 'To analyse a text made of words, you need some idea of how language works. Semiotics is based on the idea that similar understandings can be developed for systems of communication other than language' (Burn and Parker, 2003).

If we take this as a guiding principle across different modes and different textual forms, then it becomes relatively simple to see how multiliteracies and multimodality can be mapped onto the analysis of the data points described above. To treat semiotics as a tool for analysis further allows for us to critically engage with multimodal, multimedia texts, especially when we acknowledge that texts are always already assemblages (Scarratt and McInnes, 2009). This creates a strong foundation for videogame design supporting more ‘serious’ academic work (RQ3). It also gives direction to our analysis of student work on a ‘case-by-case’ level before we explore wider Discourses.

When Kress and van Leeuwen, following the lineage of Halliday, discuss the functionality of grammar, it helps us to underpin the ideas mentioned above with a rigorous critical framework, which will be important as this project moves onto discuss videogame and visual design, alongside writing. They suggest, ‘Grammar goes beyond formal rules of correctness. It is a means of representing patterns of experience... It enables human beings to build a mental picture of reality...’ (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006). Such a definition of grammar transcends any particular mode, and if we take this in parallel with an idea of multiliteracy, we can build an argument for how creative visual forms might lead back to students’ writing, as they are still making coherent meaning to be shared with some kind of audience. The idea of texts comprised of different resources which we then ‘read’, suggests that design languages can easily be layered with written languages. Multimodal Theory is another, already established body, of work that makes a sustained argument for different textual resources as playing a powerful role in the classroom, so the work done in this area of theory will also underpin the analysis of case study data (Yandell, 2008; Burn, 2009).

To further structure the analysis of multimodal student work, two different frameworks from Kress and van Leeuwen will be used. Firstly, the four strata of ‘discourse,’ ‘design,’ ‘production,’ and ‘distribution’ will be adapted from Kress and van Leeuwen’s *Multimodal*

Discourse as a way of unpacking the ‘domains of practice’ in which meanings are made (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001). Though the authors did not follow through with much development of this framework in their own later scholarship, it serves a useful function in this thesis by organising the different ways in which the data around the students’ creative work can be discussed, particularly for the *Beowulf* study. Kress argues that ‘In Social Semiotics, *meaning-making* rather than *meaning-use* is central...’ and that is truly the case with what is discussed in this project: the participants are not using signs that are given to them, they are in a constant process of making their own meanings, within their own social groupings (Kress, 2011). Secondly, also taken from the work of Kress and van Leeuwen but developed and exemplified by Burn (Burn, 2021), I will use the idea of the communicative acts, or ‘metafunctions’, of ‘representation,’ ‘interaction,’ and ‘organisation’ as a way of exploring the data from the *Macbeth* study, to account for the differing nature of this part of the project.

The interconnectedness of language(s) will also be considered through the lens of Geertz’s conceptualisation of ‘webs of meaning.’ Referencing Max Weber, he argues that, ‘man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning.’ (Geertz, 2017) These ‘webs’ for students can be constructed from many strands, for example ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality, location, but also out of affinity spaces and fan cultures (Jenkins, 1992; Gee, 2012). Geertz’s distinction of searching for meaning rather than ‘law’ is empowering in the case of student creative work, as it allows the researcher to explore interactions and intersections that may be unexpected or surprising. Additionally, Geertz’s understanding of culture as semiotic bridges his work with that of the Social Semiotic framework proposed above.

Geertz's work is also helpful for providing an overall framework for considering the different kinds of analysis student work can be subjected to. He argues,

... in understanding what ethnography is, [...], that a start can be made toward grasping what anthropological analysis amounts to as a form of knowledge. [...] What defines it is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, "thick description." (Geertz, 2017, p.22)

This notion of 'thick description' is particularly important for this thesis, as I have previously noted, because of the variety of data forms and points that will need to be triangulated and analysed. The prior knowledge of videogames students may or may not have needs to be analysed alongside the students' love of, or resistance to, learning, and their relationship to school, alongside whatever other cultural influences have bearing on their lives. These different threads, or strands of a web, can build a detailed picture of what allows students to become immersed or engaged in their work (RQ1, RQ2) and therefore helps to expand on the 'four strata' and three metafunctions categorisations that will structure the overall discussion.

Additionally, as Inglis argues, 'to develop an adequate understanding of any society and culture, it is necessary to understand the way people give meaning to their lives, make decisions and direct their actions,' which reemphasises the importance of allowing students to express their own influences, rather than just impose my own analysis on their work (Inglis, 2018). However, as has already been referred to in this chapter, the location of study also affects the webs of meaning produced by the students within it. The modes and codes of 'school' are highly specific, and my position as a teacher, with the appropriate reflexivity to counter bias, means that I am familiar enough with the field to recognise any shifts in the ways in which students are communicating. As I am directly familiar with the students, and am experienced practicing teacher, I am also aware what is 'typical' for them on an individual basis, so my analysis of their work retains legitimacy, as I have an established basis for comparison.

As the idea of ‘webs of meaning’ will help me to expand on the ‘four strata’ and communicative metafunctions, so will a more carefully considered notion of Discourse (capital ‘D’). In his discussion of Discourse analysis, Gee differentiates between discourse as ‘language-in-use’ and Discourse as language plus ‘other stuff.’ He describes ‘language-in-use’ as being about ‘saying, doing, and being,’ whereas a Discourse is a *characteristic* way of ‘saying, doing, and being,’ which is socially situated and comprised of a symbiotic ‘who’ and ‘what,’ socially and politically contextualised (Gee, 2011). By analysing the artefacts produced by the students in the manner of Discourse analysis, we are able to look not only at the data points produced by individual students, but also the connections between students, the language(s) they use, their wider influences, and any other commonalities that exist between them. Furthermore, for Wyse et al., ‘A major concern of Discourse analysis ... is to examine the relationship between language and power: to show how Discourse functions at a macro level to produce and maintain social structures and relations of power and inequality. ... Thus Discourse includes not only ways of speaking but also ways of thinking, the cultural assumptions upon which Discourse is based.’ (Wyse et al., 2017) For this project I will need to consider not only my students’ cultural assumptions, but also my own. By incorporating student interview data, this study can elevate the participants’ self-identity and perspectives on what they are saying and doing, which can then be held against my own perspective as a member of the educational ‘establishment.’ It also offers an opportunity to interrogate educational ‘third spaces’ of the kind referred to in RQ3. Finally, this model of Discourse analysis also further strengthens the case for the choice of analytical methods nesting within a wider ethnographic framework.

To return to the Research Questions for this project, before entering the phase of discussion and analysis, it is necessary to end this chapter with a review of how the research methods align with the research focus.

For RQ1, we ask, *How can 'immersion' and 'engagement' be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?* By observing students, as well as interviewing them and collecting their work, it will be possible to test the concepts developed in the theory chapter against the findings of the two case studies. Though it will not be possible to make any grand claims as to the universality of the suggested concepts, especially due to the size of the research cohort, it should be possible to draw some interesting initial conclusions. When we ask, *What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?* For RQ2, again, we will be able to begin to address this concern with the multiplicity of data points, as we will be able to triangulate observable behaviours alongside commentary provided by the students themselves. Finally, in addressing RQ3, *How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?* We can explore a facet of this through the longitudinal nature of the case studies, whereby the making of videogames is tracked alongside other classroom activities, such as writing, as well as through the capturing of student voice through interviews.

5. Analysis and Discussion: *Beowulf and Games*

The research questions driving this project foreground the redevelopment of 'immersion' and 'engagement' as concepts; require that the case studies test how the concepts manifest in classrooms; and query if 'productive' third spaces between 'creative' and 'required'

student work might be fostered through the development of immersion and engagement in/for students. Having conducted a literature review, developed a new theoretical framework, and planned a methodology around these questions, we have now reached the point of reflecting on the interaction between the gathered data and the answers demanded by the RQs.

The first of the questions, *‘How can immersion and engagement be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?’* Was, at least partially, addressed in the theory chapter of this project, with a redefinition of the key terms being developed. These concepts will now be tested against data to see if they hold up in relevance when applied to observations of lived classroom experience. In this chapter, the other two RQs, *‘What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?’* and *‘How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?’* Will be more fully explored and tested through the two case studies, and their data outcomes, as outlined in the methodology chapter.

The definition of immersion established for this project in the theory chapter stated that, immersion, *‘refers to an active relationship between person and text, whereby the person and the text are held together by a trace of one another; immersion requires some form of mediation; immersion involves a structure that is beyond the control of the person, but that they can exist safely with.’* In other words, though immersion has historically been assumed to be a relatively passive state, here I argue that it is achieved when a person finds a connection with a text, allowing them to become lost in it, but still exists in active relation to the text. Furthermore, I suggested that the conditions for this state need to be that the immersed person experience a, *‘sense of safety of comfort in the space of ‘reading’ and in the text itself,’* that the target is, *‘able to find themselves in some way reflected in the text’*, due to a trace, lack or

fracture within its structure, or at least understand how to negotiate its generic conventions through prior experience of similar schema, that there is, *'the space for play of some manner of structure, most commonly narrative,'* that they feel, *'a shifted sense of presence,'* and finally, that the state creates, *'a building of ownership and confidence that can lead beyond the narrative to engagement as a form of play within and around the text,'* linking immersion with its sister concept of engagement. Though all of these criteria are developed from a reading of ideas historically defined in Games Studies, as the theory chapter should have made clear, the conceptualisation we are working with in this thesis is novel, as it seeks to draw on this lineage to comment on classroom experience.

For engagement, I argued that it, *'refers to a metacognitive state where a person takes elements of a pre-existing narrative and repurposes them; where a person expands on or disrupts the boundaries of a text; where the creator takes control.'* Additionally, I argued that the conditions for this state should include the target feeling a, *'sense of ownership or control,'* a, *'desire to create and expand,'* and a, *'sense of confidence that can lead to the comfort and safety required for the student to be immersed in the narrative,'* closing the cyclical relationship between this conceptualisation and that of immersion. For a student, this can be attaining sufficient confidence to recast details of a narrative in another mode, transitions across media, or the drive to work beyond basic set tasks. As with immersion, the ideas are built from ones present in Games Studies and studies of 'popular culture', but are then cross-referenced with the same term in casual usage regarding classroom settings.

The broad, school-facing definition is not irrelevant to our discussion here, it is simply too loosely defined to be useful for this project. For example, Bezemer and Kress have argued that, *'People always learn from and in any form of engagement...'* which creates a theoretical space too wide to be meaningful for the research completed here. However, though my development of the term is specifically geared towards narrative and the Secondary English

classroom, and linked with the idea of immersion, what my study demonstrates is *at the same time* exactly what Bezemer and Kress suggest – that instances of engagement are about *communication*, and that they are *transformative* (Bezemer and Kress, 2015), breaking away from the narrow, transactional textual interactions expected by the English National Curriculum. In different works, both Bezemer and Kress have expanded on the idea of communicative engagement in their discussion of social semiotics, and the thinking around this field also bears great relevance to the shared sign making of the group discussed in the case study below (Bezemer and Kress, 2015; Bezemer, 2020; Kress, 2010). We could even expand our thinking beyond Bezemer and Kress here, and invoke Bakhtin’s dialogism and retain a focus on the porous nature of communication (Bakhtin, 1981).

Considering the elasticity of Discourse, we appreciate that communication occurs at the boundaries of individuals, where their interaction demonstrates that, in the terms of communicative utterance, there are no true individuals, just relationships. Jumping from discourse (lowercase d) to Discourse (capitalised), we must also note that the discursive is not only concerned with what is said, but also with what can do, and how one can be (Gee, 2011). The give and take of Discourse, the nature of communication, and relationship between audience and text and other audience members, mean we cannot understand language as a singular form, but as a multiplicity in constant evolution. From this line of thought, we find our way back the Derridean mode that underpinned the theoretical development of this thesis, where relationships (person/person; person/text) are held in tension by a trace of the other. This guides the discussion below, as we engage in semiotic analysis, but also in reflection of different aspects of the social and of Discourse that appear in the data captured during the extra-curricular club.

What the working definitions of immersion and engagement I have revisited above should make clear is that the categories of immersion and engagement are not mutually exclusive, nor are they linear: each of these states exists in a cyclical relationship with the other. Though a classroom practitioner might assume a linear relationship between the two ideas – immersion leads to wider engagement - as the case studies will go on to show, for students who are not necessarily excited by the prospect of literary texts, it appears that activities promoting engagement before immersion can often be the most productive way of securing student engagement, in both its historic and casual sense, as well as in the sense I have proposed in this thesis, which then leads them back into being able to immerse themselves in a text.

In the *Playing Beowulf* project, the eventual immersion in the text proved particularly powerful, due both to the level of challenge posed by the text, and the nature of the participants themselves.

Playing Beowulf

Beowulf is an undated epic poem that we know about from a single manuscript, currently held by the British Library. At more than 3000 Old English lines in length, and approximately 1000 years old, it is a text whose origin and true age remain contested to this day. Despite this, the narrative of the eponymous hero is widely known, spawning film and game iterations in the 21st century (See, for example, Zemeckis: 2007). Though it is regarded as a canonical text, it is not particularly widely taught in English schools, and when it is, it is most frequently taught solely as a narrative, translated into modern English, and decontextualised from its Old English roots.

As noted in the Methodology, the choice of this focal text was introduced to my school context and students through the leadership of the broader *Playing Beowulf* project, initiated by REMAP (previously known as D.A.R.E.). Though using *Beowulf* as stimulus to produce video games was the intention of the wider project, the iteration this thesis describes saw students produce art and creative writing as well, to better explore the potential of a variety of creative strategies for the supporting of the teaching of literature.

My original research for the *Beowulf* project was completed for my MA dissertation (2017), but the work presented here encompasses both different perspectives on previously discussed student responses, as well as previously unseen data. The observations I made during the case study for my MA dissertation were also, as I have mentioned elsewhere, the starting point for the research questions generated for this thesis, and led the design for the data collection for the *Macbeth* project outlined previously, and expanded in the following chapters. As such, the data gathered during the *Playing Beowulf* project, both that which was already discussed in the MA dissertation, and the data introduced for the first time in this project, can be used to further explore clear instances of what I define as ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement,’ as well as demonstrating the power of mobilising third space hybridity (an extra-curricular club) to broaden textual experience, and suggesting how immersion and engagement can lead to interesting student writing, as relevant to the English NC with its focus on the terminal GCSEs.

Geek Club: Framing the Group

The initial recruitment for the *Playing Beowulf* extra-curricular club took the form of an advertisement PowerPoint slide (FIG 1), shared in lessons by the teachers of the different English sets in Yr9, across the boys' and girls' cohorts of my former school of employment. The initial selling point of the extra-curricular club was the focus on game design alongside

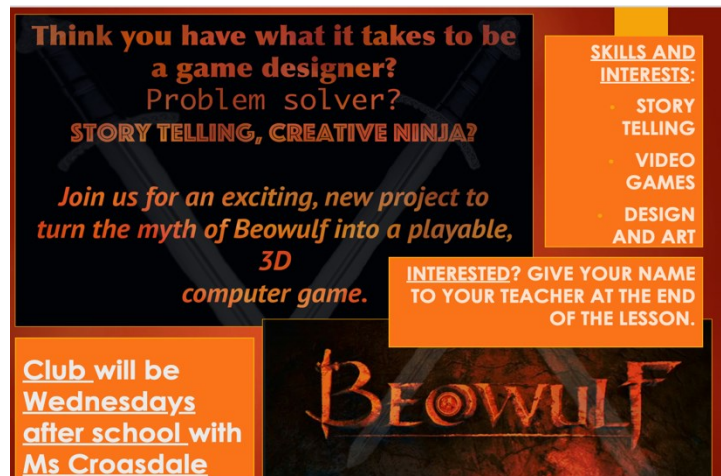


Figure 1: Beowulf Club advertisement slide

storytelling. The project had to be an extra-curricular club due to the fact *Beowulf* was not one of our taught texts, so no lesson time could be assigned. As, at the time, the students were taught in single-sex classes, the establishment of an afterschool club also meant that the pool of potential participants was broadened, rather than the research focusing on a single-sex during class time. The PowerPoint slide capitalised on the students' most familiar form of information-distribution, but the use of bright colours, rhetorical questions, and the repetition of the word 'game,' was a conscious choice for trying to attract student interest. Within the Discourses of graphic design, the slide is communicative of 'bad' design, but as a form of meaning making within the Discourse of 'school' it communicates potential sites of interest for the target audience of students. The slide as a form of distribution, as a domain of practice in which meaning can be made (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001) functions here as part of classroom 'culture.'

The demographic of students who responded to the advertisement was interesting. The boys were members of my own Second Set class, along with boys who I used to teach, but who had been moved up or down to other classes. They were explicitly interested in videogames but were not particularly engaged with English as a subject in normal lesson time. The Discourse of academic streaming or 'setting,' situated within the broader Discourses of school

had a direct effect on how the students positioned themselves within school hierarchies and the students in Second Set either understood themselves as aspiring for the recognition of Top Set, or were contrastingly happy to coast and maintain grades good enough to remain in place, but not so poor as to be moved down as ‘resistant learners’. Students falling below second set were often disillusioned with school, and in this particularly school, Third Set and below were historically more difficult to teach as a result. The girls, meanwhile, were ‘Top Set’, and felt very confident in their identity as school-focused ‘geeks’ (they renamed *Beowulf* Club ‘Geek Club’ at some point during the project, and the name persisted), a choice of Discourse-situation that will be unpacked in more detail shortly. They wanted to join because they were interested in Fantasy stories, loved creative writing, but also had experience with gaming, demonstrating a clear self-identity around their own ‘media ecologies’ (Ito et al., 2013).

The male and female students were from disparate social circles within their year group, but over the course of the project formed friendships that lasted until they left school. The students, who have now left for work or university, still mentioned the project when they came back to school to visit, and still maintained their friendships from their different paths in life. This anecdote is not included for reasons of nostalgia but because, as will be seen as this, and the following, chapter progresses, the social aspects of language and communication appear to have been a key driver behind the success of the project, and the relational aspects of the experience seem to have played a significant role in the immersion and engagement experienced by the student participants, which contributes to our exploration of the second RQ querying what factors can promote these two states.

Before the main analytical work of this chapter begins, it is necessary here to quickly revisit the strata of analysis, that have already been alluded to above, that will be used to discuss the artefacts the students create. From Kress and van Leeuwen we take **Discourse, design,**

production and **distribution** as the practices through which meaning can be made (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001). In addition, Gee's nuance of Discourse, and Geertz's presentation of 'thick description' offer depth to the analytical process (Geertz, 2017; Gee, 2011). These strata, or distinct areas of practice, allow the framing of student creative work as both inside and outside the boundaries of the normal classroom, reflecting the 'third space' of the extra-curricular club. By focusing on the ways in which meaning is made, it becomes possible to negotiate with the expectations of the NC on different terms: we start from the assumption that the students are successful makers of meaning, and only then consider how this creativity might be fed back into 'assessable' work. In doing so, this thesis retains its core belief that the NC is an inhibiting factor on students forming relationships with texts (RQ2), and that in finding alternative pedagogies, teachers can reignite a love of learning.

Motivations and Hooks within the Discourse of Geek Identity

As none of the participating students had an awareness of *Beowulf* or its narrative, the first session had to involve 'hooking' the students into the challenging and unfamiliar text, to ensure they continued to attend, after the initial 'hook' of gaming, and were motivated to participate. The session also, ideally, had to start to form a coherent identity for the group, so they could work 'productively' together in their extra-curricular third space. At the time of the study, the students' school day involved a separation between boys' and girls' classes, so they were not accustomed to socialising or working together, which was anticipated as a possible challenge for the group. This division did manifest in session one, as the girls and boys self-separated into gendered groups. To encourage interaction between the male and female students, both groups were given a jumbled-up summary of *Beowulf*'s plot, with the challenge of which group could assemble it into the correct order the quickest. As a strategy, this was quite risky for maintaining attention, as the students did not know what the shape of the

narrative was, but the task forced them to read the summaries and make a judgement based on what understanding of narrative structures they already had. This was the opposite of the strategy deployed for the *Macbeth* group, where the narrative was pre-taught, as the third space nature of this intervention permitted more freedom and playfulness in the structuring of the sessions. Fortunately, the element of competition ensured the students' compliance, as neither group wanted to 'lose,' and did not care that the form of the task would actually fit within a normal subject-English lesson as a form of learning. In the end, the girls' group assembled the plot the fastest, but this was largely down to a more ordered manner of working, whilst the boys shouted at one another in order to try and 'win'. It could be argued here that this interaction provided a snapshot of wider Discourses of gendered differences in communication and social structure, but the number of participants is too small for a meaningful extrapolation of this sort to be made. What could be noted confidently, however, was the need to foster an affinity space, to allow for shared and equal forms of communication (Gee, 2008).

In the progression of the study, before we supplemented the summary with scenes from the film, myself and the students sat down as a whole group to explore the questions, 'What do you think the key characters look like?' and 'Whose story is the most interesting – and which perspective do you think would make the most interesting game?' based on their initial understanding of the plot. It was important to explore these questions first, as, in my experience of teaching other texts, as soon as students see a pre-existing visual representation of a written text, that becomes their basis for any other visual work they do around a narrative, rather than having their own clear imaginative response to the original text. A notorious, anecdotal example of this has occurred across numerous schools where secondary school teachers used the Baz Luhrmann 1996 film adaptation to support the teaching of *Romeo and Juliet*, and then

found their students writing about the ‘fish tank scene’ or the use of guns in their formal examinations. I hoped, at least to begin with, to avoid this kind of overwriting of the text.

Furthermore, by foregrounding the narrative aspects of *Beowulf* (character, plot) rather than commencing with how to design games, it became possible to locate the new text within the established Discourse of subject-English. In England, the teaching of text, and the teaching of Shakespeare particularly, holds status as a ‘traditional’ part of educational Discourse. Though some teachers may experiment with how ‘content’ around whatever text is being taught is delivered, there are generally a lot of commonalities between how disparate narrative texts are introduced to a class. Though this project is focused on a departure from ‘normal’ pedagogy, it was important to reference familiar teaching techniques as a form of ‘third text’ to invite the students into the space of the project in a way that would encourage their immersion.

At this initial stage in the project, I recorded in my field notes that the group were more interested in Grendel and Grendel’s mother, rather than in the eponymous hero himself. The students found the idea of visualising the monstrous more exciting than visualising Beowulf, as he was quite rapidly conceptualised as a ‘Viking’, a known character type (in KS3 English lessons, the students would have had experience of discussion ‘stock character’ types as part of their usual curriculum), whilst Grendel offered more imaginative opportunities. Discourses around ‘the monstrous’ are interesting to consider here, as they are often rooted in specific cultures, but can also be strongly influenced by third textual influences. The Discourse of ‘monstrous’ can be traced from folk tales or myths, through the literary Gothic, via horror films, anime, science fiction, with diversions into wider cultural Discourses on scientific progress and the manifestation of fears regarding the body and illness. As such, the fascination with Discourses of bodily horror and the Other, appearing in teenagers as an interest in monsters and the violent side of cultural production, could be viewed as a form of rebellion against more ‘straight’ cultural forms, indicative of the students’ self-location within geek culture as a

subcultural and therefore marginal identity (though ‘geek’ is neither a singular identity position, nor is it any longer particularly marginal). Discourses around geek identities will be returned to throughout this and the following chapter, but the overlap between them, and how Discourses of what is monstrous appear in creative interests and third textual choices is important to note.

When the students watched (carefully chosen) excerpts from the film, the visual stimulus cemented the interest in the monstrous somewhat, as the students found the visualisation of Grendel funny rather than scary (which carried through in their use of humour in their own designs and meaning-making), and were intrigued by the casting of Angelina Jolie as his mother, with the persistence of her physical attractiveness, rather than the portrayal of her as something more monstrous (Zemeckis: 2007). The querying of this directorial choice was not, interestingly, limited by gender, and in the end, the students focused more on Grendel rather than his mother in their creative output, possibly indicating that the stimulus of the film had not immersed or engaged them in the sense defined by this project. The film did not chime with the students’ pre-existing idea of what monsters are, and therefore was not understood as an appropriate resource to be used in their engaged re-making of the text. The Discourse of ‘the monstrous’ then, proved insurmountable in the participants lived experience of texts, suggesting firstly, the importance of understanding and recognising the role of a student’s third texts in their approach to a new taught text, and secondly, that Discourse of some sort will always proceed the meaning-making domains of design, production, and distribution. Consequently, when working with students on creative projects, it is necessary to consider how a text might be pre-framed for them within existing cultural Discourses.

In the second of the early *Beowulf* sessions, before the students had been introduced to MissionMaker, the game authoring software, but after they had first encountered the narrative

of *Beowulf*, I asked them, in the form of a semi-structured interview, why they wanted to attend a club looking at game design. The below is a transcript of their responses:

Raphael: I like computers and games, and I'm interested in the story because //I don't know what it is//

Ferrao: //I love playing games//

Yusuf: I want to take part because I really like playing games.

Elizabeth: I think it will be a valuable learning experience... and it would be fun to make a game...

Abbie: ...Because I love making things based on history... And I am a massive geek.

Interviewer: So... what skills do you think you'll need, and what skills do you have already?

Abbie: I've done computer coding in IT... And played RPG games like Minecraft/

Ferrao: I have played hundreds of games... like Ark: Survival Evolved, Rust, Minecraft... Reign of Kings...

Yusuf: ... I've tried computer coding in IT and we made //a website//

Raphael: //I really like// coding and changing the code to put in cheats...

Elizabeth: We did computer coding in ICT... And I've played RPG and adventure games...Minecraft, Skyrim... Legend of Zelda... things like that.

Interviewer: Okay... and.... What do you think you'll learn from this project? What do you want to achieve?

Raphael: I want to learn how to make a game. a really entertaining //one//

Yusuf: //Yeah// I want to learn how to code a //game//

Ferrao: //My own game//

Abbie: I want to learn about Beowulf and make a game... I love geeky stuff!

Elizabeth: Yes, I want to achieve creating a game... that appeals to my likes and Geeky nature!

The students discussed what they had learnt in school, offered insights into their self-identifying as 'geeks,' and introduced the popular cultural forms that were the most significant to them. 'Geek' as a Discourse, and an identity position, has been theorised in numerous ways – Jenkins' 'participatory cultures' or Ito et al.'s idea of 'geeking out' as a level of engagement with a form of media being the most relevant for the direction of this thesis (Jenkins, 1999; Ito et al., 2013). However, the students did not come to identify *themselves* as geeks through an engagement with theory: they recognised themselves as geeks in affinity with identity positions made available to them through the Discourses of popular culture and of the subculture in question. If people who like the fantasy genre, for example, are recognised socially as 'geeky,' then the students were happy to adopt that position to feel commonality with a wider social

group (Gee, 2008) though a fantasy-focused geek identity may be very different from a science fiction-focused one, if we reflect on how the broader Discourse of ‘geek’ is subdivided into ever more specific sub-Discourses. The word ‘geek’ is repeated several times in the general sense, however, indicating its importance to how the students situated themselves socially, in relation to one another, and in relation to the nature of the after-school club. Considering the suggestion of Discourses not only concerning what is said, but also lived experience of ‘doing’ and ‘being,’ we can also get a sense of foreshadowing of how the Discourses of ‘geek’ subculture might go on to inflect how the participants would respond to the project tasks, and to one another (Gee, 2011). There is also the implication here that the students may have viewed their involvement in the *Beowulf* club as an extension of the online participatory cultures they had experience of outside school.

As can be seen above, there were references to general areas of interest alongside mentions of popular game franchises like *Minecraft*, *Zelda* and particularly *Skyrim* (Miyamoto, Aonuma & Imamura, 1986; Persson & Bergensten, 2011; Howard, 2011), and all of these points offered context to both how the students culturally situated themselves, but also what factors motivated them to engage with game design. Interestingly, the game references that emerged from this conversation were generically Fantasy, or were at least adjacent to the genre. These wider textual influences may well have been key indicators for the success of the project, as there are shared schema (An, 2013) across Fantasy narratives, and the Discourses they draw from, which can, in part, be traced back to *Beowulf* as an early influence on the genre and on our understanding of conventional character types and functions (Propp, 1968). This allowed a baseline of familiarity for the students (a genre-as-third text), which conveniently acted as a point of access for them into the new (to them) text, fulfilling one of the conditions for immersion.

For the students interviewed, their motivation for engaging with the *Beowulf* project also seemed universally to be their prior home-interest contexts, whether that was an interest in computer coding, or whether it was a love of gaming. In terms of the conditions for engagement I have suggested, this definitely represents a desire to create, but also is suggestive of a degree of confidence motivated by the students feeling as if they were entering a space that was familiar and safe, therefore having the potential to elicit immersion. The third condition – the sense of ownership – was not present at the start of the project, but by the end was clearly visible. Here, we can refer to Geertz’s argument, made whilst discussing ‘webs of meaning’ and ‘thick description,’ that when it comes to interpreting the signs of a culture, we understand that ‘culture is not power,’ but is ‘a context’ (Geertz, 2017). Both the unique and the shared contexts of the student participants formed a new cultural web from which we can attempt to interpret meaning.

If we turn Geertz’s borrowed metaphor back on our references to different kinds of Discourses, then we can understand the construction of the web to be the assembled strands of Discourse, out of which we are all made. Furthermore, if we consider the use of the Derridean ‘trace’ in the formation of the redefinition of immersion and engagement suggested earlier in this project then we can perhaps take the idea of the web of Discourses even further. The trace considered as a (non)presence that holds dualisms implausibly together – both confirming and denying their binary nature – then we could consider understanding traces as a kind of proto-Discourse. Webs and ideas that have not yet formed a full presence, yet contradictorily exist, could be viewed as trace, waiting to be woven into a set of culturally purposeful full-Discourses.

The geek-Discourse interests the students brought to the study – the coding, the genre preferences – proved fundamental in allowing a social literacy of, and web of meaning for, the group to develop, as will be discussed both later in this chapter, and in the next. We are also

able to get a hint, through this brief exchange, of the enthusiasm the students had for discussing the elements that they felt made up their self-determined identity, rather than the forced identity of ‘secondary school student.’ The verb choices, ‘like,’ ‘want,’ ‘love,’ all imply a force of emotion, which is not what a teacher would particularly expect from a disparate group of students waiting to learn about a challenging literary text. This enthusiasm reminds us of the power of mobilising a student’s ‘third texts’ in helping them to overcome academic challenge.

Game Planning: The Stratum of Design

If we consider the stepped-process the students underwent in order to eventually design and produce their own games, it is interesting to continue our discussion with their ideas about designing videogame music, as that was the next chronological focus of the project, and the first example of meaning-making in the design stratum. After the students had received an introduction to the characters and simplified plot of *Beowulf*, and they had reflected upon what they wanted to achieve with their game-making (they uniformly wanted to adhere to adapting sections of the original narrative), they were asked about the elements they thought made up games. They volunteered comments about the different visual or ludic modes one might encounter in a game, and only eventually mentioned music. Though music was not the first game mode that the students thought of, given the opportunity to deliberate over what music they might want for their own games, they generated some noteworthy ideas, implying the affective potential of the mode for students granted the agency to create with it (Hawley, 2022). I took the decision to lead with music as a design element firstly because of the affordances of MissionMaker – students could import their own choice of music in to the software, a freedom they would not be able to replicate with character design – and secondly because the participants’ lack of foregrounding of the mode of sound suggested that it was a design element they would not have focused on naturally for themselves. It could be argued that the lack of

recognition of sound as a mode stems from the process of game design clashing with the Discourses of what ‘English’ and narrative teaching should be. Even though sound is a feature of the English classroom – consider the prevalence of reading texts aloud, and the teaching of famous speeches – it is not the primary means of assessment, and thereby the written has primacy over orality (Ong, 1982; Derrida, 1997a). Encouraging discussion of music proved to be a useful pedagogical choice to make, as the power of sound was something that, eventually, would characterise a lot of the students’ later work.

Intuitively, the students decided to use spider diagrams to map out their ideas, though this method of design was not dictated by myself. This could be viewed as a feature of ‘formal’ school Discourses bleeding through into the third space of the extra-curricular club, as this form of idea-generation was common in the English Faculty’s teaching at the time. If we move from the strata of ‘Discourse’ to that of ‘design,’ we can see the production of meaning in both the layout of the students’ ideas, and in the ideas they gather.

As a point of reflection, this structural, pedagogical overlap is not something that I have yet accounted for in this thesis: the idea that basic classroom planning activities might be considered a framework for the ‘how’ of RQ3’s overlap between creative and formal tasks being achieved. This practical aspect roots us back in classroom practice and away from abstract theory in a manner that I have already expressed as being fundamental to the utility of this project.

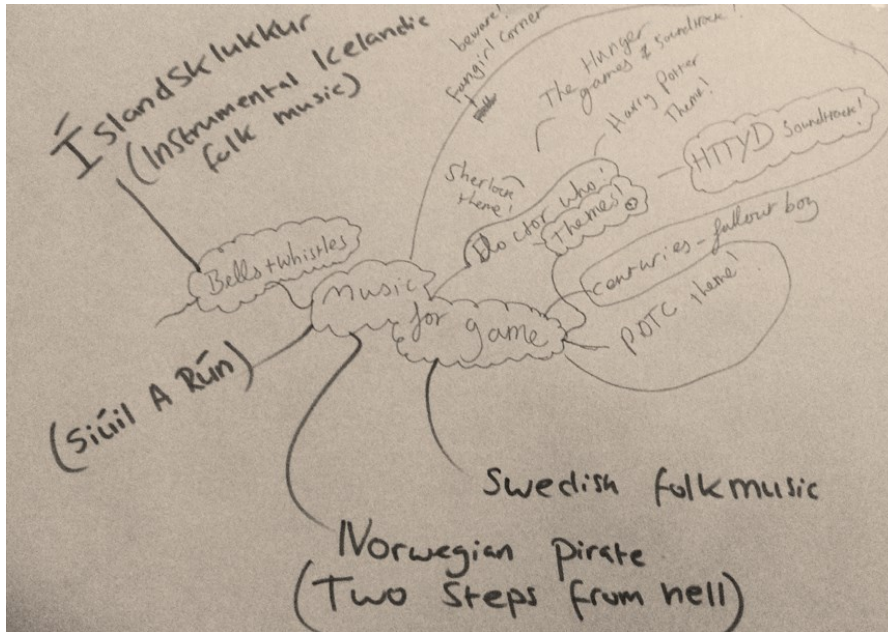


Figure 2: The girls' music ideas

When we look to the outcomes of the mind-mapping the students did to visualise the kind of the music they wanted to appear in their games – Abbie and Elizabeth as the only girls chose, again, to work together, whilst the

boys, Ryan, Adam, Raphael, Yusuf, and Ferrao also automatically grouped themselves together – we can see interplay between the students' influences, their third texts, and their decision making regarding planning for creating something out of *Beowulf*, a text that was broadly unfamiliar to them. In this planning phase, and so early on in the project, the students seemed to want 'permission' to be allowed to refer to their preferred textual forms, which, again, could be viewed as another third space incursion by the rigours of normal classroom practice. However, the clashing cultural Discourses of 'geek' culture and 'school' seem to have found synergy in this design task, whereby a 'school' mode positions the students' third texts in relation to the projected game making.

As can be seen in the image of their spider diagram [FIG. 2], Abbie and Elizabeth offer some 'serious' suggestions, but then circle some of the popular cultural franchises they felt might have music appropriate to the mood they wanted to create (with the acronyms they use, HTTYD refers to *How to Train Your Dragon* (DeBlois and Sanders, 2010) and POTC refers to *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Verbinski, 2003)) and add the label, 'Beware! Fangirl corner!', indicating that, firstly, they wanted to broadcast a particular identity – that of geek culture –

with the references they were making (Ito et al., 2013), and secondly, that they viewed *Beowulf* through the lens of the generic conventions of fantasy. Fantasy genre-as-third text gives the students schema and well-established resources to draw from in their game making, but also begins to ground their understanding of *Beowulf* in something familiar, fostering the conditions necessary for them to become textually immersed. As well as referencing fantasy, there are several explicitly Scandinavian choices in the girls' music, that roots their design considerations in place as well as in time. This locates the students' understanding of *Beowulf* as already shaping around third texts that overlap with elements of the original poem. Similarly, the reference to an Irish song appeals to how some subdivisions of the Fantasy genre pull from Irish and Scottish folk traditions.

The students' other design choices stemmed from researching 'epic' soundtracks (evident in the reference to the production company 'Two Steps from Hell,' who make music for film trailers) introducing a third Discourse of 'professionalism', and further exploring the historical and geographical location of *Beowulf*, considering if they wanted to make it sound as 'real' as possible for the period, which they described as 'geeking out,' or if they wanted to emphasize the scale of the emotional drama, as one would expect from the Fantasy genre. The choice of the phrase, 'geeking out,' could almost be a direct reference to Ito et al, and is an interesting repetition from the girls, possible indicating their desire to lay claim to a clear 'geek' identity position in an extra-curricular club perceived as a safe space for them to do so, even though they were sharing that space with a group of boys broadly unknown to them, hinting at the potential for a site of affinity (Ito et al., 2013; Gee, 2008).

However, the idea of 'geek' or 'fangirl' culture that most closely pertains to the process the girls were going through is the idea of fan culture developed by Henry Jenkins (Jenkins, 1992; Jenkins, 1999; Jenkins et al., 2006) and similarly by Ito elsewhere (Ito et al., 2008). Jenkins' work particularly examines fan cultures, and how fans appropriate material from the

texts that resonate for them, to be used in their own creative responses (in the strata of design, production, *and* online distribution) to the texts they love, which tracks to our definition of engagement. The girls are ‘geeky’ in the sense that they rapidly became invested in a fictional world, and used their time and resources, collectively, to expand that world. For the purposes of this thesis, as our interest is in text and creative textual responses, we can understand this appropriation of different cultural resources through the concept of the ‘third text,’ as has been noted previously.

Potter and McDougall (Potter & McDougall, 2017) as noted earlier, (with reference to (Gutiérrez, 2008; Bhabha, 1994a), suggest that ‘third space’ can be utilised as a paradigm for exploring points of intersection between multiple influences. Considering ‘third spaces’ as hybrids with physical and representational crossover (Lefebvre, 1991; Bhabha, 1994a; Soja, 1996), or where there is overlap between disparate spaces (Potter & McDougall, 2017; Gutiérrez, 2008), we have a perfect description for how extra-curricular clubs can function in the school environment, and as such do not belong to a single set of cultural Discourses. Before we consider the jump to ‘third text,’ extending the metaphor, it is important to note that the *Beowulf* ‘geek’ club occupies a ‘third’ space between the academic and the personal, as it is on the school site, and involves a canonical text, but is part of an extra-curricular intervention and pertains to videogame design, suggesting once again a play of the Derridean trace, holding similarities/opposites in relation to one another. Consequently, the club represented the opportunity for experimental pedagogy alongside student ‘voice’ to play out around the learning of a narrative text and a set of design skills. Beyond a literal spatial understanding of purpose and identity, we then also extend the idea of the spatial, as we are not just exploring the influence of locations and identities on individuals and their literacy, but are conceptualising where we see the intersectional, trace-inflected, influences of their third texts, which vary depending upon the cultural influence relevant to each student. The third texts

renegotiate this idea of bridging, liminal, or contested spaces as operating beyond location-space, in narrative or metaphorical space. It is in this kind of space, we could argue, that students are able to become immersed in texts, as the texts are no longer professional/scholastic or personal/casual: they have a different kind of weight and a different kind of presence.

If, in the idea of third spaces, the first is a physical or ‘personal’ location, the second is an online or ‘professional’ space, and the third is a hybrid space. Then, in the case of ‘third texts,’ and following the established paradigm, the first text is one produced by a student, the second is a text to be studied, and the third is a text accessible to a student that allows them to unlock the second, studied text. The differently located texts are held in relation to one another in the manner of the Derridean trace or the supplement, as was engaged with in the Theory chapter of this project: the separation of texts by academic value is artificial, and so all forms of texts can be held as, in some way, relational. What is more, it is important to return here to the idea of text-as-construct, whether the texts are ‘first’ or ‘second,’ as this reminds us that any text is a site for potential creativity, as students mine them for resources with which to make (Barthes, 1984) in demonstration of their engagement.

As will be seen with all of the *Beowulf* participants, in this and the following chapter, any cultural text can act as a third text to enable a student to translate a more ‘challenging’ studied text into something they can be immersed by and can engage deeply with. The girls’ exploration of game music simply represents the first step, though their process suggests the potential for engagement to lead to immersion, rather than the terms working together in the opposite direction, as one might have presumed to be the case.

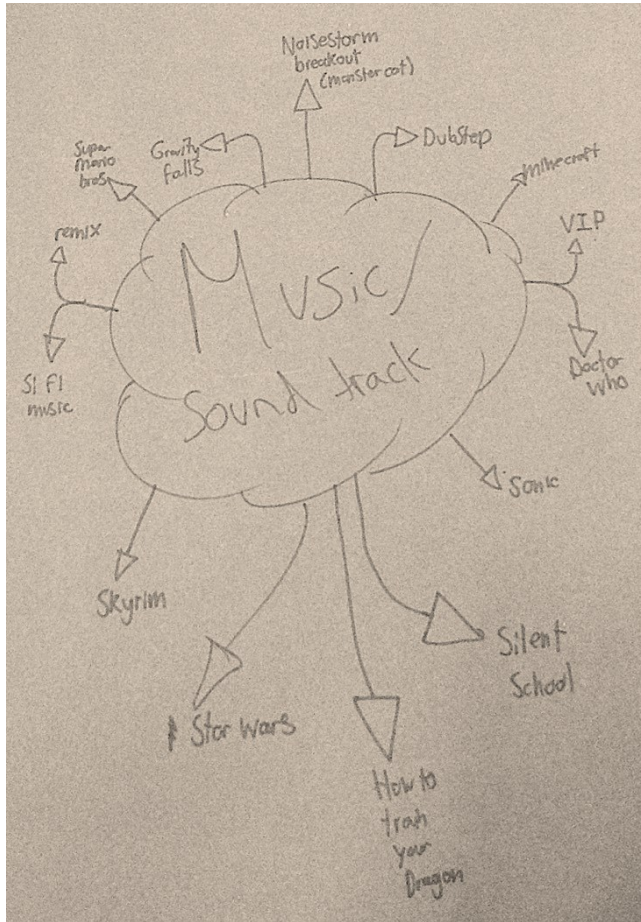


Figure 3: The boys' music choices

For the soundtrack task, the boys' group had a different, and somewhat less measured, approach to their designing [FIG. 3]. Some of their ideas they 'stole' from Abbie and Elizabeth by walking over to the other table and reading what the girls had written, whilst some of their ideas are other computer games or manga. The 'stealing' represented the boys taking steps to interact with their female peers, which the girls characterised humorously. Though the texts the boys reference could be considered canonically 'geeky,' their approach to fan culture felt different to that of the girls, as

they were, initially, slower to adopt 'geek' as an identity position, though an external viewer might perceive their interests as sitting firmly within that stereotype. Though there is overlap, the girls were more interested in Fantasy worlds and 'academic' research into *Beowulf's* context, whilst the boys more frequently pulled from Science Fiction and popular game franchises, which we see both here, and was observed in their wider discussions, implying an alternative subdivision of the 'geek' Discourse. However, *Skyrim* emerges once again as a key resource that the students pull from when attempting to make meaning on the stratum of design. The overlaps between this particular game and *Beowulf* – genre, location-type, character-types, soundscape, creatures, weaponry – appear to make it a perfect reference point for the students to 'poach' from for their own designs and productions as they became engaged.

Though their working methods were more chaotic to watch, the boys essentially demonstrate the same interplay of ‘third text’ reference that the girls did, just from different sources, and more of them explicitly games. *Sonic*, for example, is an interesting example of a game structure that influenced the boys’ working, as it is an iconic game with a very simple concept, hinting at attentional differences in their chosen forms of play. This might tentatively be also linked to the students’ varying relationships with school, study, and academic English. There is also a slightly incongruous reference to the musical genre of Dubstep, which was later explained to be in reference to one of the boys having seen the film *Deadpool* (Miller, 2016). *Deadpool* is an incredibly violent film, with an age-rating in excess of what the boys should have been able to watch, and the use of casual violence in the boys’ own videogames potentially demonstrates wider exposure to this kind of content. It would be possible to discuss ideas specifically around geek cultures and gender here, but that nuance falls outside of the focus for this thesis. However, the persistent willingness of the students to interact with *Beowulf* via their preferred third texts is, as stated in the introduction to this project, a key idea underpinning this thesis.

Game Making: The Stratum of Production

Having considered the group dynamic, and some of the designing the students did for sound, we can now explore the game production itself, though this was a process that brought with it some challenges. In this study, the MissionMaker software used was in a much earlier iteration than was used for the *Playing Macbeth* project discussed later, so there were some technical limitations to what the students were able to produce. There were also problems with the level of ICT provision offered by the school, as PCs often froze or shut down, and websites that might have been used to aid student research were frequently blocked. However,

despite the challenges they faced, the students persisted and became immersed in the software as much as in the *Beowulf* narrative itself.



Figure 4: Character design

In the final stages before using MissionMaker itself, the students had started to consider which parts of the narrative they might want to make games out of. They had spent some time creating manga-style drawings of the characters, and had thought about what style of games they wanted to make. The appropriation of manga aesthetics was a common decision across both the girls and the boys throughout the project, and before we discuss the games themselves, it is worth

reflecting on the kind of visual design work typified by such illustrations as FIG. 4. Considered as a whole, this image functions quite successfully as a representation of how students can operate in third spaces. The lined paper from an exercise book and the blue pen are naturally classroom production modes, however the manga-style character, planning lines (design-in-action) still in place from where the student mapped out the proportions of the face, demonstrate the influence this kind of text, and its specific cultural Discourses, has on the students outside of school generally, and their available visual resources for communicating their ideas, more specifically. This fragment of work is an example of a web of meaning that one student has assembled around herself from a wealth of (online-facilitated) Discourses (geek culture, manga and anime cultures, fan culture), design materials, production opportunities, and distribution platforms. She has no sense of hierarchy or status of the meanings she has spun together, she simply used her own third texts as a starting point for her own productions.

The participants' 'learning' has not been harmed by them utilising third texts to express their ideas about *Beowulf*, in fact, the reality appears to be quite the opposite: by finding a point of familiarity to use as a way in, the students have become engaged in deeper thought about the content of *Beowulf* and what the words on the page can mean. This implies the 'productive' third space introduced by RQ3 in quite a satisfyingly accessible way: by bringing a student's lived experience *to* the target text for study, rather than forcing the target text *into* their lived experience, we can potentially move towards utilising the states of immersion and engagement consciously to improve educational outcomes, through improving assessable writing.

Despite the prevalence of a variety of manga acting as third text influences, enabling students to become immersed in and engaged with the design process, other texts also attained visibility during the early stages of the process. One of the students, Raphael, produced some graph paper he had been given for a piece of Maths homework, and used it to draw 1-bit- style

characters. This may seem incongruous (and more tenuous in terms of immersion/engagement) as a design/production choice,

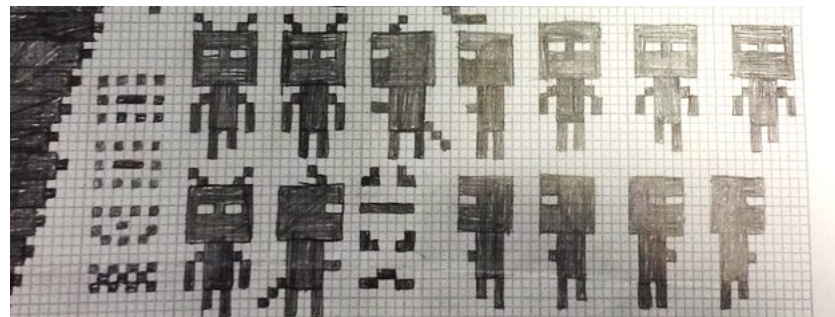


Figure 5: 1-bit figures

as games of this style were not initially evident as part of the students' textual lexicon. However, once we consider the huge popularity of the Minecraft franchise at the time of the original research, it is possible to suggest where the aesthetic choice was derived from – the rendering of characters and architecture as blocks, which here [FIG. 5] was transposed into 2D sketches aesthetically similar to videogames common to earlier timepoints. This example is helpful as it focuses on a game-specific third text, relating to the transmedia nature of the work the students participated in. What this demonstrates is that, once again, meeting students halfway, with their own third texts, allows for immersion in creative work, as it permits them

to enter a creative space with tools they can use. Particularly in the case of Raphael, this then demonstrated the theoretical link with engagement as he went on to produce more formal writing, which will be discussed in the next chapter, and is significant for him as one of the most resistant writers of the cohort.

Moving onto MissionMaker, with their focused, methodical approach, Abbie and Elizabeth were able to produce a simple, but functional game, which demonstrated the sum of everything they had spoken about during the club – both in terms of their own reading of *Beowulf* and their third text influences. Making the jump from single (design) modes – the visual, sound – they occupied the strata of production through a ludic multimodality, shifting from demanding a reader/viewer to requiring a player for their products to be accessed. Their creation was demonstrative of engagement, with the layered way they assembled mode and intertextual, transmedia references, but their making and playing were also immersive, as they were deeply involved in what they were doing, suggesting the levels of creative complexity involved in game design.



Figure 6: MissionMaker sword rack

Unlike their creative writing, which will be discussed later, the girls stuck to a snapshot of the original text, where the player, with Beowulf as their avatar, had to find their sword (FIG. 6),

unlock a door, and go to fight Grendel. Though the group had initially found Grendel and Grendel's Mother more interesting characters, they uniformly shifted to creating games focusing on Beowulf-as-avatar going to fight Grendel. This could be read in two ways: firstly,

this decision could be explained by the students working with the affordances of this iteration of MissionMaker, which implies a human, male avatar automatically suggesting that we play as the eponymous hero. Secondly, we could consider that this might be the students thinking in role as game designers, considering what it is to play a game. This second suggestion brings in the students' *game* third texts, and requires that we acknowledge that their understanding of how games are played then conversely influences how they navigate the narrative of the target text. In transforming the poem into a playable game, they have to consider how a sparse narrative can be rendered as choices, actions, and environments, that might effectively situate a player/avatar in the world-of-poem-as-game-space.

If we look back to the production screengrab [FIG.6] then we can unpick how the tools of game design work alongside the students' third text references, and result in a focused engagement with the narrative of *Beowulf*. Once a designer has established a basic map using MissionMaker, they are then able to place set and prop elements into it, to help build up the game environment into a more finished product. Here, Abbie and Elizabeth have used a set of shelves to present their player with a choice of weapons. This is not a novel game design element – it contains a trace of a lot of the other games, both in the fantasy genre and otherwise, that the students have played, whereby they can make a series of modal choices affecting how their production moves forward. However, the implied materiality of the wooden shelves, harking to *Skyrim* particularly, is also incredibly specific to the fantasy world they are attempting to create, though they are working within the affordances of MissionMaker and the options it provides to game makers. The design of MissionMaker itself gives its users a framework that is entirely appropriate to *Beowulf* and thereby acts in the same way an English teacher might provide students with examples of 'quality' writing before expecting student to write for themselves. Generically, the props on offer to the students also guide them towards

making appropriate choices for the ‘battle tackle, bladed weapons and coats of mail’ they would also encounter in the poem (Heaney, 2000).

Their decision to have objects that the player must collect in order to unlock a door functions similarly as a recognisable game convention, and the presence of the ‘bag’ in the lower lefthand side of the frame guides the player to an understanding that there will be items to collect to put into the bag, or it would not be there, as it is easily recognisable as a signifier to players of games. The choice of music, lifted from *Skyrim*, as has already been alluded to, also takes a design convention from an existing genre piece, that adds further coherence to the girls’ production. Finally, the presence of game values in the upper lefthand of the screen implies a health count, or similar, to those who have gamed before, and this functionality led the girls to incorporate the idea of health potions, reflecting their knowledge of the grammar of games derived from outside of the *Beowulf* project. The fact that the game values are coloured red, green, and blue coincidentally maps directly onto the values in *Skyrim*, suggesting that the software’s designer also drew influence from that particular game. The choices the girls made were layered through this balancing of what their prior experience with games taught them to expect from game-authoring, what MissionMaker could allow them to do, and their trying to realise a version of the *Beowulf* narrative that puts the audience *in media res*. The design of the girls’ space, over two levels, and with a locked-door puzzle, mobilises the design elements of existing game productions, and uses whatever spatial representations MissionMaker offers to add layers of complexity to the final product. When we consider the depth of experience I have just described, we can begin to understand the level of engagement that can occur by leveraging third texts as a way into textual engagement in a school environment, as well of the depth of immersion that can manifest when students are in the process of making.

The overall simplicity in gameplay may be because of the students being unfamiliar with, or challenged by, the software, but it could also be a product of the girls being concerned with ‘correctness,’ and wanting to be accurate to the text, or wanting to be ‘successful’ by creating a game that actually worked (all thoughts that will be revisited in the *Playing Macbeth* chapters). However, we could also argue that the girls had gained a sufficient understanding of games as a medium through the design process and their own playing of games that they were interested in imagining and meeting the needs of an imagined player, and so focus on functionality rather than length. By incorporating a simple puzzle, they found a way to blend game-conventions with the narrative from the poem, thereby considering the ludic as well as narrative aspects of games (Burn, 2021).

The girls also made a design/production decision that we will see echoed by the *Macbeth* group: they produced a developed game fragment out of a minor detail in the target narrative. We know that Beowulf fights Grendel in the original poem, and in that existing detail is a trace of a suggestion that prior to this act of violence, Beowulf must, logically, have prepared himself (actually, he fights Grendel unarmed, as swords cannot hurt him, but Beowulf’s men lie in wait with swords). The girls exploited this trace and created ludic action in the absence of poetic action, making meaning in the domain of production. In this particular ‘web of meaning’ we see the Discourse of geek identity, the Discourse of the school ‘achievers,’ Discourses of fantasy narrative, the multimodal resources of game, and the students’ third texts woven together to produce logical, playable action.

The girls, though occasionally frustrated with the bugs in the program, were satisfied that MissionMaker contained sufficient resources to realise their ideas. The software allowed them to map the ludic modes of game production onto their pre-existing understanding of the vocabulary of the Fantasy genre. This then allowed for them to make a game that fit both *Beowulf*’s narrative, and their own sense of the kind of games they themselves enjoyed playing,

particularly *Skyrim* as a key influence on their designs and production. The familiarity of the swords, potions, and scrolls were representative of Discourses of the Fantasy genre they knew from other games (and manga, anime, novels, and films), so they found assembling them into their own narrative productions a fluid experience, for which their process, we can argue, was immersive, as defined for this thesis in its safety and easy familiarity.

As reiterated at the start of this chapter, we redefine immersion as ‘*an active relationship between person and text, whereby the person and the text are held together by a trace of one another*’, which is then built on with the conditions that the immersed should experience a ‘*sense of safety of comfort in the space of ‘reading”*’, be able to ‘*find themselves in some way reflected in the text*’, that they find, ‘*space for play of some manner of structure,*’ and feel, ‘*a shifted sense of presence,*’ as well as ‘*a building of ownership and confidence,*’ which leads back into our reconceptualised sense of engagement. The description of the girls’ experiences above appears to meet these conditions quite securely, as we see their comfort and confidence in very obvious ways in their actions and the production of their efforts. We also observe their engagement in the activities beyond the game making, as will be discussed in the next chapter.

The question we might ask here, though, is what can be said about the ideas of ‘trace’ and ‘lack’ that were fundamental to the formation of the concepts of immersion and engagement. What is ‘lacking’ in *Beowulf* and where do the girls find a trace of themselves within the original text? The trace can be viewed as the schema of Fantasy fiction, as they identify themselves so strongly with the genre and helped them find their identity and ‘geeks,’ but the trace could also be the ludic aspects of videogames that shaped the decision-making process, as described above. That commonality *Beowulf* has with their prior experience of culture allowed them to feel safe in the space of the new narrative. The lack, meanwhile, could

be viewed in a number of ways, from the absence of female characters in their design, to the missing depth of visuality in the original text, to the lack of exploration of character personality or motivation that a modern reader might be more used to. We can also consider the different media at play here: *Beowulf* is pure narrative, so it obviously lacks the specifically ludic aspects of games. This modal lack invites both immersion and engagement as it offers the opportunity for transformation and play in the new media form.

The spaciousness of *Beowulf* as a source text allows for all kinds of creative design interventions for students to make. Our general understanding of texts as multiple and porous means that there should always be a way to invite students into engage with any given piece of literature. The development of story structures and genres over time also means that students, whatever their preferred third texts, will be able to trace some kind of lineage back to whatever narrative they are being expected to study. The important thing for teachers is to create the space for such engaged experimentation to happen, so that the learning of literature can present opportunities for immersion and engagement, rather than becoming a sterile form of rote learning.

The girls' immersive experience with designing basic *Beowulf* narratives with *MissionMaker*, as discussed above, then led to engagement with the wider project, and to the creative of pieces of writing that can be 'seen' and 'read' within the usual boundaries of the English classroom. However, these particular students would not be considered as 'resistant' learners, so though the text was challenging, the girls *did* have prior experience of being immersed of engaged with texts and learning. As Abbie and Elizabeth both had familiarity with playing computer games, and had access to a wide range of possible influencing narratives – books, games, television series, films, graphic novels – the game they produced together showed a clear sense of narrative, that of a hero solving a problem then fighting an enemy, but

also elements, like health potions, that are particular to the ludic aspects of games. After creating their *Beowulf* game, and after having the opportunity to construct and then inhabit the narrative space, it was interesting, *but not surprising*, to see how the girls then felt sufficiently comfortable to take the poem on board as one of the cultural artefacts that they have ownership over, and then create new assemblages with it in the form of their creative writing. The boys' game-making, and wider involvement, meanwhile, presented a very different side to the case study, though still one that was overarchingly positive.

After finding that they could not easily create the kind of videogame they wanted or were used to playing themselves, the boys, particularly Adam and Ryan, instead focused on creatively testing the limits of the software in ways it was not intended to be used, but in a way that was still, arguably, both immersed and displayed the traits of engagement. They had a vision – design ideas - for how to make *Beowulf* into games, so the learning had still occurred, but they did not find sufficient momentum to negotiate their ideas with MissionMaker into a final production. Instead, their creativity took other forms.

The boys' more destructive form of play turned the game-authoring software into a game itself, but one still, albeit more tenuously, linked by genre to *Beowulf*. Adam, choosing to work by himself, designed an intricate game map by adding rooms together to make a pattern, over and over again, until the software crashed, suggesting that we consider his work of the design strata, rather than accurately that of production. He stated that he was trying to create a game on the scale of Triple-A titles like *Assassin's Creed*, which was one of his favourite games, and encompasses a huge map for the player's avatar to roam freely over (Désilets, Raymond and May, 2007). *Assassin's Creed* formed a key 'third text' for Adam, as it helped him conceptualise the idea of a mercenary warrior like Beowulf, and also framed his understanding of how avatars interact with game spaces. Designing maps is also an activity

that has a clear lineage in the Fantasy genre across media, even though he did not draw map designs before creating one in MissionMaker. As a player, Adam clearly desired the freedom to make choices and (at least in appearance) have a greater say in shaping the emerging narrative in the game space. Interestingly, in his write up of his experience of visiting a conference to talk about the process of game making, it was an image of the map-building function of MissionMaker that featured on the PowerPoint slide he produced, suggesting that the experience of attempting to world build was something that resonated with him particularly strongly. It could be suggested that this functionality was also what was the safest form of creation for him, as it offered more comfort (the ‘safety’ of immersion) than challenge.

Ryan, meanwhile, designed a small map, but added as many green lizard creatures (an NPC – non-playable character – option used to represent Grendel) and warriors to a room as possible, again until the software crashed. For him, Discourses/narratives with a clear villain and a sense of justice were the most appealing, so his fascination with the ‘monster’ character may have been a negotiation with the point at which a game can be ‘won’ or not against a scale of ‘evil.’ As we can see in [FIG. 7] there is a sense of movement and chaotic energy in the gameplay as



Figure 7: Ryan's gameplay

Ryan demonstrated his game for the group. Even though the play was interrupted by the software crashing, he would try again, demonstrating a strong emotional engagement, much like Adam did with his maps. In his game, in the most complete version he created, the soundtrack added in combines music (again lifted from *Skyrim*) that situates the game in the

Fantasy genre, but also a voiceover by Ryan, who adopted a ‘monstrous’ voice to narrate a summary of the start of the *Beowulf* narrative, which added an herteroglossaic additional layer to his engagement with the process (Bakhtin, 1981). In order to achieve the voiceover, Ryan engaged in different aspects of design work. He wrote what he wanted to say, demonstrating engagement through an accurate repurposing of the original narrative, he figured out where in his game he wanted it to run, and then he recorded the audio using a phone, so it could be transferred into the game. The intense sound-modes added to the confined spatial dimensions of his design, which he wanted to be quite claustrophobic, so the player would focus on the threat of the monster NPCs – which were pre-designed to fit the generic Fantasy aesthetic of the rest of the game options. Underneath the apparent chaos, we can still see a reluctant student engaging with a challenging literary text, and observe him demonstrating immersion in the repeated game play. What is key here, and will be picked up in the next chapter, is how this immersion and engagement in a reluctant student can be channeled back into ‘assessable’ writing (RQ3) in the third spaces created by a teacher.

For Adam, he became immersed, in the sense defined above, in the map-building functionality of the game, in the dropping in of tiles of different location-types to create the map. To add props or NPCs to the map you enter into a different mode, through a first-person perspective, and complete your edits to the game environment itself. Adam did not display much interest in this second phase: he found the literal world-building to be the most immersive part of the process, as there lacked the sense of challenge that comes with trying to set up game rules correctly. After each crash of the program, he would start the process again, experimenting with different configurations of room-types, or using the colours of the tiles to create patterns. Ryan, as stated, was conversely more interested in the first-person perspective part of the editing, rather than the mapping, where he could see all of the creatures he was

spawning. Both of these responses suggest that learning can still occur in non-standard forms, particularly when the freedom of the third space, and the influence of the third text, can be leveraged. Each of these boys chose a perspective in MissionMaker-as-game, and used it to express a point of intersection between *Beowulf* and their preferred third texts, which should cause those who teach to pause and consider how the trace of a students' lived experiences can manifest in learning spaces in unexpected and initially non-obvious ways.

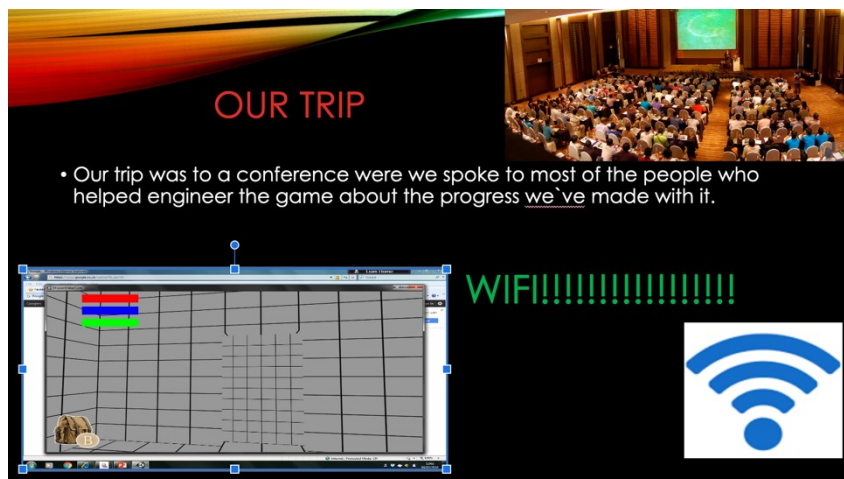
I noted at the time that the intensity with which the boys carried out their stress-testing of the software looked, from the outside, as immersive as the way in which the girls did whilst creating their functional game. Consequently, it is possible to argue that the boys were using the game making software as a game in and of itself, although it could equally be argued that the process was demonstrative of the two groups of students' relative confidence academically, with the boys electing for a less 'challenging' form of play (though the constant crashing and reloading of the software did demand a particular level of attention and patience). As argued above, however, the boys, particularly Ryan, demonstrated a great deal of commitment to the extra-curricular club after the game making period was finished, and produced writing demonstrating that they had gained a good understanding of the text from their playful engagement with it, and the software, as well as the friendships they developed with their peers. This process demonstrates that not only is immersion is not limited to one particular kind of task, but also that finding immersion in something tangential to a projected form of textual production can lead back to immersion/engagement in the process that was the original end-goal, with the students having become textually invested along the way. This can additionally linked back to Heathcote's classic analysis of learning through drama, and Vygotsky's work on learning through play, which underpins playful, experiential, and rehearsed action as key developmental points in an education (Vygotsky, 1933; Heathcote et al., 1984). It also hints

that there is a natural multimodality to engagement as a process, that has not yet been accounted for in the definition I have been working with.

Furthermore, the immersion and engagement the student-participants displayed in the writing and stop-motion animation sessions that fell after the core game making sessions, which will be discussed in the next chapter, again showed an emergence of engagement with the text by blending it with their ‘third text’ references and the collective humour developed by the group throughout the process. Though the games were naturally multimodal in both their construction and their presentation, the stop-motion animation the students eventually produced demonstrated even greater multimodality, and required the skills of multiliteracies in order for it to work, suggesting a surprising depth of understanding gained by all of the students, despite their outwardly different presentations of engagement with the game making (Kress, 1997; Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). As will be explored later, the students combined voice recording, writing and drawings on a whiteboard, and photographs of Lego and Minecraft ‘minifigs’ in order to create an anarchic and funny mini-version of the whole *Beowulf* narrative. Though this did not look like ‘serious’ work (Gauntlett, 2018), it was a moment where students of different academic abilities, and levels of interest in school, came together in alternating moments of intense immersion and engagement in order to collectively make something inspired by a literary text, using a shared language that they had developed together throughout the process. Observing this, for a moment, as a teacher rather than a researcher, it seemed to me to represent an instance of students displaying a love of learning entirely disconnected from the usual focus on exams, and later, when these same students came to leave school for university in the academic year of me writing my first draft of this chapter, the *Beowulf* club, the games, and the animation were the thing they remembered spoke to me about.

Speaking about Games: The Stratum of Distribution

There are many more instances, particularly later on in the project, where the group functioned as a coherent unit, particularly when I took some of the group to talk about their games to a conference at the



British Library (“Playing

Figure 8: Adam's conference slide

Beowulf” conference, British Library, December 2015.). Here the students confronted their anxieties about speaking to a room predominantly full of adults, and talked through their games and their creative choices themselves, moving firmly into Kress and van Leeuwen’s ‘distribution’ strata.

All of the students viewed the conference as a very serious occurrence as it was an event outside the scope of their usual experience. None of the students had been to the British Library before, and did not know what to expect, though after the experience Adam’s slide above [FIG 8] suggests that he was particularly enamoured of the free WIFI. On the PowerPoint slides (see below for more detailed comment on the choice of mode for the students’ communications) the participants created when writing reflectively we can see consistent language choices across the girls’ and boys’ slides, even if the quantity is disparate. Elizabeth writes,

On December 7th six of us went to the British Library to a conference with the game producers and those involved in the research project (Playing Beowulf). We learned about what another school had done during the project, they had created a drama piece re-enacting the story of Beowulf using movie maker on their iPads, and then held a panel of what we had

created in Mission Maker. We displayed three of our maps in video form as they had been previously recorded by Abel the former week. We explained the process of creating our maps and how the rules applied to the game and in what way we could make the game more interactive with the player. From this experience we gained the knowledge on how to inform others about how we constructed the world so that the player could go through levels and use different objects to enter the room. We also described how we could lower and high the game values one of which represented Health, then using the rules we could display an end screen for when the player ran out of health.

In her writing, we can observe her use of ‘learned’ as a verb choice, resonating with Adam’s use of ‘progress’ in his more graphically-oriented comment. We can also note the formal register in which she writes, as she appears to want to instruct the reader of this text in a similar manner to how the students ‘informed’ the attendees at the conference. The language used in this writing appears to contrast quite starkly with the playfulness of the extra-curricular sessions, designed to fit into a different kind of Discourse – one of ‘professionalism’ or ‘work’ – indicative of the group moving from the third space of the club to the second space of the conference.

It could be argued that the school context for the *Beowulf Project*, and the linkage of the game making to a formal conference, meant that, however far the students strayed from the original Old-English text of the poem, they *all* still framed their thinking and reflecting in the terms of how ‘progress’ is measured in school, as if they had to justify their creativity and play in a ‘serious’ manner. Furthermore, though we will see examples of Elizabeth’s creativity in the following chapter, we are able to observe her choice of ‘academic’ tone here as indicative of a clear awareness of different audiences, whilst Adam maintains ‘progress’ as an appropriate metric to be concerned with when talking to adults. Whilst the ability to code-switch can be seen as an important life skill, we can also pause here to consider the extent to which Discourses around examinations filter down from school leadership, to teachers, to classrooms, and how that affects the experience of students.

Adam articulates himself in less depth than Elizabeth on his slide here, but this was not reflective of his presentation at the conference, where he was able to communicate on a level with his peers. Consequently, understanding the variance in writing quality and quantity in the girls' and boys' reflective work as simply a gendered difference erases a number of possible variables – prior literacy level, perceived value of education, work ethic, SEND, home language, access to third texts, level of oracy versus written English – though detailed, deeper discussion of which is beyond the reasonable scope of this chapter. What is important to note here is that the students involved in the *Beowulf* project, as mentioned previously, were all contextually different, and as this project is concerned with their immersion in, and engagement with, text, above anything else, what we can say is that all of the participants experienced some kind of positive outcome from the experience.

Despite the lack of extended writing, however, we can note Adam's use of other semiotic resources. His slide design offers an assemblage of 'found' resources, which he has selected as appropriate for describing his experience. The design of the slide background and font are a Microsoft pre-set that he has chosen to try and make his work look more formal. This involved a conscious choice, rather than using the default white background. He found a photograph of the British Library's lecture hall, and a screen grab of MissionMaker's interface through an internet search, and he placed them alongside some clipart representing a WIFI icon. Though presenting a very simple construction, his design choices offer the headlines of his experience, demonstrating reflexivity, albeit of a kind antagonistic to teacherly expectations of writing. This is still a form of media literacy, however. He has used a technology to make meaning (PowerPoint), has searched for resources to express what he did not want to use words for, and has assembled his findings into a multimodal presentation that tells us exactly what he wants us to know. Of course, whilst this is a point of communicative development for Adam himself, it would not be considered assessable within the framework of the English classroom,

so we return to the tension that underpins this thesis – the capacity we have to create bridges between student creativity and formal GCSE-style work, or our failure to (RQ3).

The conference presentations offered the students the chance to regard their own immersion and engagement with the game-making process, and they talked successfully (academically) about their experiences. None of the participating students would have been able to present in the manner that they did, had they not experienced a deep sense of immersion and engagement with the process, allowing them to own their learning and subsequent creative exploration. They repurposed the creative tasks they had completed into another new form – a ‘teacher’-style PowerPoint, as the form they are taught by in school – demonstrating another emergent kind of engagement.

Having explored (chaotically) the epic of *Beowulf* and tested the limits of MissionMaker, they had ‘learned’ and ‘progressed’ from where they started, certainly. However, the framing language of ‘formal’ education does not suffice to articulate the experience of playing, creative a social language, and finding an educational experience messily joyful.

Student Reflections: The Stratum of Peer Distribution?

Throughout the period the *Beowulf* extra-curricular club ran, the students were encouraged to write reflectively about what they were doing (as already referenced above), or to write creative pieces inspired by the poem, and both the girls and boys did this with equal compliance, which I will discuss more fully in the next chapter.

Towards the end of the process, Elizabeth created a PowerPoint presentation describing her early experience in the project, though she wrote it after making her game, and after taking part in creating the stop motion animation. She was the first member of the group to produce

reflective writing, and her choice to produce it as a PowerPoint presentation influenced all of the other students after her to use this program as a mode for presenting reflective ideas. As the group knew they were part of the research for my then MA dissertation, Elizabeth felt she was contributing to the process by presenting her thoughts formally. With the majority of secondary school lessons distributed via PowerPoint slides, as noted above, it is possible that this Discourse of ‘school-appropriate’ is where she derived her idea of formal presenting from – the method the adults in her life frequently use to communicate ideas and ‘learning’. It could also be inferred, however, that, through her seriousness in undertaking the reflective task, she was able to see for herself the educational link between her creativity and her formal education.



Figure 9: Elizabeth's PowerPoint

On her first slide [FIG. 9], Elizabeth has the title ‘*Beowulf* Club,’ which is then also translated into the runic alphabet. The students were introduced to this alphabet during the establishment phase of the project, and beyond the

initial enjoyment of translating their names into runes, this is the only real instance of the group referencing runes in their creative work, though it evidences that it was in some way retained as part of the Fantasy narrative landscape. That it was Elizabeth who referred back to the runes, however, is unsurprising, as she is the student who was interested in including ‘Íslandsklukkan’ or ‘Icelandic Folk’ music as the non-diegetic sound for her game, in a bid to be ‘correct’ in her historical framing of what she envisaged creating, demonstrating engagement early on with her targeted drawing upon of pre-existing resources. Her design choices work together to form a

product that she wants to feel appropriate for ‘educational’ Discourse, appropriate to the distribution stratum in this context, but also adopting a tone that her peers would take guidance from.

In a later slide, talking about MissionMaker specifically, she formally related,

Mission maker's [sic] rule system is easy to understand and if used correctly can preform[sic] complex equations. For example, we programmed our game so that, if the player did not own a certain object as they had not picked it up, they could not enter certain zones. A few of us were able to add values to the game, as the creatures we spawned in were able to take away points from our health (Game value 1). We added the rule that if specific items were picked up and used they would add a certain amount of health back to the character. Mission maker also made it possible for us to add music into our games and to create end game screens for when the character died. The game had some faults, for instant when certain commands were activated the screen lagged as did the actions that you preformed (Some people Ryan spawned too many creatures and caused the entire system to crash. Other people spawned too many rooms Adam.)

In addition to her consciously transactional style of writing – Elizabeth is offering a clear explanation of her process in order to be informative - we can also observe evidence of quite sophisticated multimodal humour between the text of the boys’ names and the visual strikethrough she uses to pretend she does not want to name them for what she perceived as silly behaviour, as she took the whole process much more seriously.

Her engagement not only in the process of game making, but also in the process of ‘doing research’ is very clear from how she writes, and her desire to explain what she is doing and how she is doing it demonstrates the ownership aspect of engagement, almost to the extent that she appears to want to teach others about the software and how to use it. Her immersion in the process whilst working was also very visible as she demonstrated intense focus on her game making with MissionMaker, often expressing surprise at how quickly the time had gone when it was time for the club to finish for the evening, the ‘shifted sense of presence.’ Here, we can frame her deep immersion as arising from the fact she sees traces of different elements of her own web of meaning – the academic, the geek – in the game making and tasks that surround it. We can also categorise what she makes as (Derridean) supplements to the original

text, adding what is lacking to something that is, paradoxically, already closed and complete. The transformation observable in Elizabeth is not just evident in her relationship with the text, however, it is also visible in her assumption of a confident, leadership role in the group, and her developed relationship with her peers, as the engagement of the group became increasingly powerful as the creative became more enmeshed with the social. This also help to develop the social literacy of the group (Gee, 1992).

As with her referencing to runes and ‘Icelandic Folk’ music, the terms with which she refers to the process of game making indicate a desire to be ‘correct’, or professional, when reflecting on her process. Her willingness to work through the bugs in the program and establish working ‘zones’ and ‘game values’ meant that her game was playable, and followed a game-logic that demonstrated her previous experience of playing professionally-made games. Reporting on her game in my original dissertation, I recorded,

Describing her simple game, Elizabeth talked about giving the player opportunities to make choices. She created a rack of swords ...in the first room of the game, because she thought it was a good hook for a player to be able to choose their own weapon. Then she created a puzzle element, so the player would have to pick up a 'key scroll' ... to unlock a door to move on to the next stage of the game. After solving the 'puzzle', the player moves onto a 'boss battle'. Upon completion of the boss battle they are rewarded with 'health potions' to see them through the projected next stage of the game (which she was unable to complete).

The terminology in inverted commas represents Elizabeth’s own choice of lexis, as recorded in my field notes at the time. These terms would be familiar to gamers, as she ties in traces of relevant resources that help her to make sense of game making.

She consistently pursued the ‘correct’ tone and language choices for whichever task she was completing, when writing transactionally (apart from where she makes affectionate fun of Adam and Ryan in the quotation above). It is only later, when we look at her creative work that we can observe her write with a greater sense of freedom. This may be down to her greater sense of how to control language (she reads widely and a lot) lending her the ability to pattern

shift and use the resources of different writing genres as her own, or could be reflexive of her location as an academic high-achiever and a constant pressure to be 'right'. Another root of her choices could be her interest in the Discourses of Fantasy as a genre of literature, films, and games. The tropes of a character choosing their weapon to a background of folk music could refer to any one of a number of Fantasy texts, so it could be that her manner of discussion of her ludic and technical choices is actually her unconsciously fitting into a mode, schema, and genre that she has a natural familiarity with. She specifically noted the *Elder Scrolls* (Bethesda, 2006) franchise as a reference point, so it could be argued that her game design has aspirations to replicate a similar form of gameplay. The third textual influences on Elizabeth are obviously richly varied, within the Fantasy genre, and they allow her to articulate her ideas in a clear and detailed way, whilst maintain generic unity. She situates herself comfortably within the Discourses of what can be 'said' in the genre, and how new texts in the genre can be recognisably formed.

What we observe in Elizabeth's writing, and in the experiences of all of the participants, is a sense that the students experienced something beyond the usual conceptualising of mediated identity, fandom, and cultural production, so immersion and engagement offer us a way of moving beyond theoretical positions used to frame young people and their relationship to games and creation in previous scholarship. By shifting the nuance of immersion to considering it as an active, relational state (incorporating the notion of 'trace'), highlighting safety, familiarity, and commonality, allowing for the space for playfulness that allows for the building of confidence, and acknowledging the shifted sense of presence, means that we shift the theoretical focus firmly into exploring what occurs in an educational setting, rather than just talking about the experience of playing games. As has been returned to throughout this project so far is the point that this research occupies an intersection between different fields of

study, and so our modified concepts address that intersection in looking not just at the text, or its use, but what comes after, creatively.

Similarly, for engagement, I suggest that it describes a state where a, '*person takes elements of a pre-existing narrative and repurposes them,*' focusing on the creative freedom of the subject when they are inspired by a text that has captured their imagination. The conditions here included feeling a, '*sense of ownership or control,*' a, '*desire to create,*' and a, '*sense of confidence that can lead to the comfort and safety required for the student to be immersed in the narrative.*' The focus of these twin concepts is that they feed into one another, and can therefore be ongoing, rather than focusing on singular instances of involvement. The initial immersion, or engagement, observed during the game making phase of the *Playing Beowulf* project, as we will now go on to discuss, was only the start of the relationship that the students formed both with *Beowulf* and with each other. These states were able to fuel a much deeper participation in the project, with outcomes that could be linked back to more formal, academic methods of production.

6. Analysis and Discussion: *Beowulf* and Wider Creativity

As with the previous chapter, we begin this one by returning to the research questions, considering how the data from the *Playing Beowulf* project moved us towards, in some way, answering them. We also need to consider how this data has helped the process of continuing to shape and refine the concepts of immersion and engagement. In order to expand on the original research questions, this thesis foregrounds the reconceptualization of immersion and engagement, requires that the case studies observe how the concepts may or may not apply to the lived experience of students, and questions if third spaces bridging self-directed 'creative'

work and ‘required’ school work might be generated through a better understanding of the conditions required for the creation of immersion and engagement.

Returning to the research questions ‘*How can immersion and engagement be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?*’ We began to see in the previous chapter that, in their redefined form, the concepts of immersion and engagement showed promise as ways of describing how the students related to the text of *Beowulf* and the creative challenges set for them. It was also possible to use the terms to frame how we can draw on students’ prior textual experiences, their ‘third texts,’ as ways of allowing them to gain a sense of ownership over the more challenging *Beowulf*.

Contemplating the second RQ, ‘*What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*’ In light of the data discussed in the previous chapter, it is possible to begin to shape a response. When the students, arguably, demonstrated immersion, in their planning or playing, or engagement in their responses to designing and making games, or in stress-testing the MissionMaker software, the conditions that allowed for these states to manifest appeared to relate particularly to their prior exposure to other narrative forms, in the first instance, and arose out of the relationships they built with one another, in the second. The first condition hints that our exploration of ‘third texts’ is productive. The second condition implies that we may need to circle back around to social models of literacy noted in the literature review, but not meaningfully carried forward into the initial redefinition of immersion and engagement worked with so far (Gee, 2014).

The final RQ, ‘*How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?*’ has yet to be addressed in any sustained way, but this will be more of a focus for the chapter to come.

As noted above, the definition of immersion we have been working with so far - *an active relationship between person and text, whereby the person and the text are held together by a trace of one another; ... [requiring] some form of mediation; ... [involving] a structure that is beyond the control of the person, but that they can exist safely with.*' – can arguably be evidenced in both the students' game planning, and in their game playing (or their non-standard applications of the MissionMaker software). Engagement, again as noted above, – [the] *metacognitive state where a person takes elements of a pre-existing narrative and repurposes them* – can meanwhile, perhaps, be seen through the different activities the group undertook, as well as relating to the group's social structure. However, what the working definitions of immersion and engagement revisited here should reiterate is that the categories of immersion and engagement are not linear, but each of the states feeds back into the other in a cyclical relationship.

As highlighted elsewhere, despite the natural progression between immersion and engagement seeming to be that students become immersed in a narrative, and then become engaged enough to do something with it, the student experiences recorded so far have begun to indicate that this is not always the case. For students who are not necessarily excited by the prospect of literary texts, it appears that activities promoting engagement before immersion can often be the most productive way of securing student interest – or 'engagement' in the sense I have proposed in this thesis – which then can lead back to a more immersive experience of being swallowed by a narrative.

Communicative and Social Literacy

One particular member of 'geek club', Ryan, was a strong example of how the longer-term development of the *Playing Beowulf* project was transformative in terms of student engagement, as he joined the group with a friend and, despite conforming to the idea of the

‘resistant learner’ in normal school time – to review the definition, students who ‘...avoid challenges, don’t complete tasks, and are satisfied to “just get by”’ (Protheroe, 2004) - became one of the groups’ most dedicated members, showing up every week, engaging with all of the different tasks that we experimented with after we moved on from the original game-making.

As already noted, the idea of the ‘resistant’ or ‘reluctant’ learner is another semi-concept, like immersion or engagement, that features in writing about pedagogy fairly frequently, but is often deployed without a clear definition. In this work, I understand ‘resistant’ or ‘reluctant’ learner as Protheroe does above, and as Hauschildt and McMahon do, when they observe a group of boys in a reading group with the description, ‘They *were* reading. But they were *doing* reading, writing, and talking about literature as tasks...’ (Hauschildt and McMahon, 1996). In other words, completing tasks as a form of performance. I will treat the terms as a way of describing students who are not always actively disruptive, but complete tasks to a level sufficient to avoid sanction, no more. These are students who are happy to coast, and who exhibit little love for learning – they complete schoolwork because they *have* to.

Ryan's commentary on the *Playing Beowulf* project, which he completed in the manner of PowerPoint slides at the end of the club because that is what Elizabeth and Abbie did, can be seen as typical of his writing in lesson time, that is, appearing rushed through without proofreading, mimicking how he talks, rather than conforming to the standards expected of academic English. In this instance, the choice of PowerPoint is interesting, as it mobilises the strata of Discourse, design, and production, before finalising his meaning making as a form of distribution. In other words, Ryan is utilising a distributive method from the Discourses of ‘school,’ through the way in which teachers generate classroom meaning, but doing so creatively to generate a product that performs a role as part of the expressive design portfolio he built up during the club’s duration. This suggests the limitations of Kress and van Leeuwen’s

four strata, as they are not always clearly separate as categories, though they do serve to encourage us to consider the different ‘domains of practice’ where meaning may be produced in a school environment (Kress and Leeuwen, 2001). As well as occupying a space between production and distribution, it is also important to acknowledge where this kind of writing sits in relation to Discourse, particularly the Discourses of school and learning. Ryan says,

I have been attending a club which has taught me a lot about programming, animation and the epic legend Beowulf. We have done some stop [motion] animation revolving around Beowulf which is when you take LOTS of photos and make a movie or anything you want. We have also made our own Beowulf games on a software called mission maker-core. In summary I have learned a tonne of things that I have never learned to do with Beowulf, animation and even programming. I have had allot [sic] of fun doing this (MY ALARM) and drawing all the doctors (ABBIE) and being peacemakers (ELIZABETH).

Though it is not expressed in ‘exam’ (or assessable) English, what Ryan has to say is interesting for multiple reasons. His attendance and relationship with the club demonstrated engagement, as I define it, and his working methods, and focus, during the game design and stop motion animation tasks demonstrated immersion, so what we have here we have here in his reflection is his own expression of what the experience felt like for him.

There is an emotive force in Ryan’s writing, with the use of capitalisation, and the repetition of the quantifier ‘a lot.’ He appears both excited and proud of the new creative skills he has learnt, but also happy in the social relationships he has formed with his peers, which falls within the Discourses of ‘geek’ culture, as the group self-identified. The direct reference to the activities of other group members mirrors Elizabeth’s writing quoted in the previous chapter, demonstrating the ways in which he was able to absorb some of the more controlled writing structures of his more confident friends, indicating that the domain of practice of the ‘design’ strata is a site not only for meaning making, but also a site for learning how, in the spirit of Social Semiotics, meaning is shared and curated within a culture or group.

Furthermore, within the context of the extra-curricular club we are able to start to see how, by creating the conditions for immersion and engagement, it is possible to develop student writing.

Ryan is clear that he feels the experience was educational, he references being ‘taught’ and that he ‘learned,’ new things, locating his description within the Discourses of ‘school’ and ‘education,’ though this is perhaps unsurprising as the extra-curricular club took place on the school site. However, Ryan also writes, with an enthusiasm he similarly expressed verbally at the time of writing, about the things he has done or made, particularly mentioning the stop motion animation, which he enjoyed more than the game-making. He explicitly talks about the club being ‘fun,’ and in the last sentence mentions events that happened over the club’s lifespan – he found a sound effect for an alarm that he attempted to embed into his game and animation (fully engaging with the modes/ design resources of sound), the ‘doctors’ refers to another club member’s manga-style drawings of the different faces of BBC character Doctor Who, and the ‘peacemaker’ reference is to a third member of the group who tried to keep the whole group on track whenever they became distracted from whatever task they were supposed to be doing at the time. His reflection is, interestingly, rooted in the experiences of the group as much as in his own, personal journey. This socially oriented reflection directs us to the models of social literacy signposted in the literature review of this project (Gee, 2014; Kress, 2010). It also is indicative of how subcultures and social groups evolve patterns of communication that are uniquely theirs, and so their process for sign making becomes part of their social web, simultaneously building webs of meaning for the individual. In the theoretical framework for this project, this social literacy provides another set of resources for an engaged student to use, as well as promoting creative production work within a group at the level of peer-support, and peer-conformity. The safety of the group is, furthermore, a contributing assistor in the achievement of immersion-in-creative-process.

The elements about the club that engaged Ryan did not, particularly, *begin* with the text of *Beowulf*, but they always led back there, and the semiotic resources the group shared, and their process for assembling them into meaning, formed the basis for mutual creative work within the stratum of design. By the end of the process, a student with little interest in applying academic effort in school developed a knowledge of a challenging text that was not superficial, but deep and personal. The friendships that grew out of the group certainly helped with this, but his engagement also grew out of the way the planned activities of the group provided a meeting point between the text and his pre-existing cultural context. This meeting point can be further evidenced in some creative writing he produced towards the end of the project, as we can see below,

BEOWULF - ANGREB HEROT MED ILD OG STYRKE [ATTACK HEROT WITH FIRE AND STRENGTH] - Breaking news! A cucumber golem called Grendel viciously attacked Herot due to the noise coming from the hall. He complained that he was trying to sleep to get some rest for destroying England but instead he used all of his mobile data to destroy Herot.

Witnesses say they saw a man trying to fight back at the cucumber but he was just too strong. He got BLASTED across the hall he nearly got impaled. Another witness said "der var Tarme organer og blod flyvende overalt på et tidspunkt så jeg en hoved flyve forbi og lemmer [there were Guts organs and blood flying everywhere at one point I saw a head fly past and limbs]" this attack is mentally scared people for life. [Re-translations from Danish provided by using Google Translate after Ryan submitted his writing]

If I were to review this production from the perspective of a teacher preparing a student for their GCSEs, I can see elements of this writing that would gain technical marks from the exam board's mark scheme (to mobilise the Discourses and lexicon of the teaching professional) – the use of the conventions of a newspaper in his headline, the introduction of more varied vocabulary in 'impaled' and 'viciously,' and the introduction of different kinds of punctuation. However, there are much more interesting points in this work that we can explore.

Whilst Ryan utilises the formal design conventions of newspaper writing, we can also see details of the television dramas he watches with his parents – he explained that he regularly

watches *Casualty* (BBC), *The Bill* (ITV) and *EastEnders* (BBC), which we can argue, unconventional choices though they are, are his ‘third texts.’ In these points of recasting – *Beowulf* as drama or crime procedural - we can see evidence for what ‘confidence’ and ‘safety’ meant for Ryan as he negotiated engagement and then immersion in the project: given the space to explore, he used what was familiar to him – performance of violence, social drama - as a model for how he could encounter a new text. For Ryan, the engagement with the wider *Beowulf* club, and its social relations, fed back into his ability to immerse himself in writing, which cyclically allowed him to engage further with the resources of both his original text, and his third texts. Furthermore, when we note one of the conditions for immersion was finding a trace of one’s self within the text with which to form a relationship we can suggest that the action of police procedurals, tempered by elements of kitchen-sink drama, Ryan found familiar, allowed him to see resonance in the violence of *Beowulf*, its structuring of relationships, and its interrogation of ‘good’ and ‘evil.’ Additionally, in his acts of engagement, we see Ryan pull *Beowulf* out of the canon and into the realm of popular culture, a move antagonistic to the National Curriculum model of English, but incredibly positive in terms of promoting a sense of enjoyment in learning for students.

The reliance on a ‘third text’ as a way of bridging understanding and making connections is something I witnessed across all of the students in the *Beowulf* group, and the students in the *Macbeth* group, who will be discussed in later chapters. It is significant that students draw on such disparate schema to support their ‘in school’ writing, as this is a reality that not capitalised on enough by classroom teachers, especially as the National Curriculum for England does not account for the study of media and different media texts. Though some of Ryan’s ‘third texts’, such as *EastEnders*, are not necessarily communicated in standard, ‘exam’ English, they are still frameworks for grasping narrative and character, and therefore can be useful bridges in drawing out details for students encountering more challenging or

archaic texts in their school setting, and a practitioner seeking to apply the work done in this thesis to classroom pedagogy could take this model as a productive starting place.

As a, generally, resistant or disengaged student, it should perhaps be unsurprising that Ryan reached outside the canon for texts to help him make sense of an unfamiliar narrative. In his interactions with the other members of the group, however, we can equally see that he was willing to take on the influence of other students, not just his own cultural reference points, and so we can observe the social aspects of language and literacy at play as a form of observable academic development. We also witness that, through a non-traditionally academic route, Ryan was able to find textual immersion.

Interested by Elizabeth's decision to utilise Icelandic folk music as a mode of her game, Ryan made the decision to employ Google Translate so that he could include elements of a second language mode in his writing about *Beowulf* and about his game, as can be seen above. He chose Danish, as he felt that it 'sounded' right, and was in roughly the right location for the original narrative, linking once again to the general 'Scandinavian' and genre-Fantasy Discourses that framed *Beowulf* for the students. Once he had translated his text from English, he used the 'reading aloud' functionality of the program to play the Danish words out for the group, adding an element of multimodal playfulness to that particular session. During school, he did not choose a 'Modern Foreign Language' as one of his GCSE options, and as a 'white Working Class British' child, he has not grown up in a family where additional languages are spoken, so the interest in Danish was an uncharacteristic development. The transition from another member of the group considering the use of music from another country to Ryan's play with Google Translate again hints at the importance for expanding our idea of engagement beyond the standard Discourses of 'school' to recognise the importance of the social aspects of students' encounters with text, alongside their encounters with each other. The socio-linguistic

and socio-semiotic is also borne out in his use of the music from *Skyrim* as the music layer of his soundtrack, as he is also pulling from the influence of Elizabeth in the design of his game.

The sharing of both modal resources and ‘third texts’ between the students remained playful and cyclical – the girls took as much influence from the boys as the boys took from them. Abbie, like her friend Elizabeth, was deeply immersed in her use of MissionMaker but like Ryan used strong references to third texts in order to structure her experience and to build her relationship with the narrative of *Beowulf*. She used her own cultural reference points – *Doctor Who* - to inspire some writing based on what she had learnt from the game making. In a *Doctor Who* story, that she preferred to describe as ‘fan fiction,’ Abbie referenced details from *Beowulf* that are noticeably accurate to the original poem, working in the stratum of production to make meaning out of disparate resources. In addition to this, however, she also recognisably transposes the characters of the (tenth) Doctor and Donna Nobel from the BBC’s popular *Doctor Who* franchise, capturing what fans of the show would recognise as their personalities, and therefore making meaning that crosses the distributive stratum by considering both the school-peer audience, and a wider, online fan community. Abbie explained that of all of the series that she had watched, these two characters represented her favourite Doctor and Companion pairing (in the show, the eponymous Doctor usually has at least one human companion), and she saw them as having the greatest potential for carrying her story design.

In her written product, Abbie has successfully mimicked the characters of Donna and the Doctor, including their emotional presentation and patterns of speech, in a manner that someone familiar with the show would be able to recognise, perhaps why she terms the piece ‘fan fiction.’ Her *Beowulf* narrative occurs as follows,

*“Where should we go today?” asked the Doctor, his light brown trench coat trailing behind him as he spun around. Donna shrugged then gripped the edge of the TARDIS’ console as she violently started to shake and twist.
“Whoa!” shouted the doctor as they stopped with a jolt. Glancing at Donna, he*

slowly opened the doors to reveal a marshy headland covered in grass and mud. His white converse squelched as he stepped out and headed to the large limestone hall ahead.

“Ughhh!!!” exclaimed Donna “Why does your machine keep sending us to places that are so... uh!” Rolling his eyes, the Doctor stepped into the sandy coloured hall to be received with a beautifully painted ceiling and hundreds of fur cloaked people.

“Well that’s just wizard!” She shouted, looking up and bringing all the attention to them.

“Hello!” The doctor smiled “I’m the Doctor, and this is Donna, my... companion” Before anyone could answer, a terrifying roar shook the ground and the people in the hall scattered and someone shouted “Grendel!”

The Doctor’s eyes widened “This isn’t... it can’t be...”

“Beowulf, help!!” shouted someone as a large scaly green creature that looked like a cucumber crocodile burst through the oak doors. Donna screamed, of course having absolutely no knowledge of English literature, and ran.’

Elements of the writing take their tone from the translation of the poem used in the sessions, drawing on phrases like, “Grendel was the name of this grim demon/ haunting the marches, marauding round the heath/ and the desolate fens...” Where we read of the monster, but also of the location (Heaney, 2000). Then, the combination of common Doctor Who tropes, as one category of semiotic resource, with elements from the *Beowulf* legend is extended by the character of the Doctor’s surprise at where spaceship/time machine, the TARDIS, brought him, a frequent occurrence in the series. The meaning making here pulls from traces of diverse Discourses (correctness, intellectual property, fan production, genre, text) that the student in the state of engagement ignores in favour of producing a final, desired product that is meaningful to themselves and their projected audience. Furthermore, Abbie is also successful in linking the style of her writing to past episodes of *Doctor Who*, where the Doctor encounters important literary figures like Shakespeare or Agatha Christie. Her quite knowing inclusion of the line, ‘of course having absolutely no knowledge of English literature,’ however, demonstrates that she is consciously playing with the distinction between what is historical fact, and what is myth – though the presence of aliens in *Doctor Who* makes a modality claim for a setting where the action of *Beowulf* is entirely plausible and could, therefore, be ‘real.’

The demonstration of engagement across directed and chosen texts is also obvious, as Abbie is happy to utilise resources from both.

There are different influences at play in Abbie's writing too – the description of Beowulf's nemesis Grendel as a 'cucumber crocodile' is a reference to the phrase 'cucumber golem' used by Ryan in his story, demonstrating the shared codes developed by the group, and also the groups' democratic nature with regards to meaning making in the strata of design and production. Her writing, then, has the projected audience of her peers in the extra-curricular club, but also one comprised of the wider *Doctor Who* fandom, as they would see this text as an acceptable extension of that particular fictional universe. Her process of writing saw her happily immersed in the task, as she is a confident and talented writer who understood the semiotic resources she wanted to use. However, her reference to the shared language of the group indicates that she felt at home with her peers in this environment, which we could argue aided her continued engagement with the project, as much as her having the opportunity to write, as she learnt how to effectively pull resources from across media to create a new production. Socially-situated literacy, again, appears here to be an aspect of immersion and engagement not accounted for in the initial development of the concepts.

The community the students built up during the *Playing Beowulf* project saw students who would be understood as 'more able' (high prior-attainment, existing talent for one or more subject) in the school context, become friends with 'resistant learners,' and students who engage with school, but who still do not attain particularly highly. In engaging with the group, Abbie contributed to a shared practice and a shared language that transcended academic ability in the 'third space' of the extra-curricular club. Freed from work being marked by teachers and the pressure of exams, students were able to bring their 'third texts' to *Beowulf* no matter how academically illegitimate they might be perceived to be in school Discourse. Abbie was therefore able to construct writing she wanted to make, and aim it at distribution to an audience

of non-teachers, claiming the resources of *Beowulf* as her own, fulfilling the criteria for engagement as defined by this thesis. As a student who would later attend an intensely academically selective sixth form college, achieve A/A* grades in her A Levels, and go on to attend an Oxbridge college for university (to read English Literature), Abbie is clearly an incredibly bright and talented student, so for her to be able to find playfulness with language and non-canon text, and to associate with students who she otherwise would not have come into contact with academically, would have been an unusual experience, and one I hope that contributed towards her love for English Literature. For her, it can be argued that her immersion in game playing in the third space (yet academically adjacent) location of the extra-curricular club, and her engagement in different forms of making and literacy, broadened her understanding of the potential of narrative, and developed her awareness of the different places from which her peers might meet with texts.

As has been clearly demonstrable with Abbie, Elizabeth too produced creative writing with the strong influence of third text proxies, but as with Claudia, who will be discussed shortly, the influences that appear in her *Beowulf*-inspired writing are drawn from visual modes: though her gameplay was strongly biased towards the generic conventions of Fantasy, Elizabeth is also a fan of manga and anime. Due to the intense violence that often features as a normalised part of the Discourses of anime, Elizabeth seems to be comfortable with highly stylised violent scenes in narratives – she was unaffected by gore in the film adaptation of *Beowulf*, for example – and her interest in the aesthetic of animated violence can be observed in a sample of the writing she produced during the extra-curricular club, which was very different to her approach to the game design element of the sessions:

Blood splattered on the frigid ground, painting the frosted grass a sickening scarlet. There was a pain wracked scream as giant white teeth sank into soft flesh, penetrating armour and forcing bones to snap and shatter into shards of torturous fragments. A copper tang flooded the air and the scene froze in panic, the giant humanoid creature

stood, half crouched, masticating a soldier dangling from its jaws with an expression of glee, while the soldier feebly attempted to call for help, before they were pulled into its gaping jaws and swallowed whole, with one last scream for help echoing from the creature. A sudden breeze threw each soldier back into their senses as the creature lunged for another soldier; no one had faced a foe like this before, a soldier swept for its leg and struck, but all they received for their efforts was a billow of steam and a small stream of blood that stopped almost immediately. It swept out one giant hand and grabbed another soldier, stepping forward onto another. One soldier ran away from the battle, panting hard and heart pounding in his chest, the grand hall in which they resided came into sight, large beams of oak were carved into intricate designs that had kept the building standing for years, the soldier ran into the hall, slamming the giant doors open and calling out,

“Beowulf! We are in need of your help!”

A brunet stood quickly, hand on the hilt of his sword

“What is it? Have we been attacked?”

“Yes, by a horrible beast, the like of which we have never seen, we have tried to take it down, but a steam simply rises and it is healed! It had taken down three of our men when I came to get you, you must help!”

In her writing here, we can see strong influence of the way manga comics represent violence, as her writing is designed to be highly visual, using strong imagery and sensory language, but also with echoes of the tonality of the written mode as it appears in books and scrolls in *Skyrim*. As with all of her peers in the group, her recasting of the *Beowulf* story retains a sense of the original tone, and the kind of language used in the translation (*Skyrim* as third text bridging anime and *Beowulf* by way of genre and the Discourses of Fantasy), showing how the text was engaged with, as she uses resources from the target text and from anime in order to construct something new.

By opening this passage with the action of blood splattering, we are immediately presented with Elizabeth’s image of graphic violence, something common across a lot of popular manga and anime, for example visible in *Attack on Titan* (Isayama, 2009), which is both graphically violent and popular with teenagers technically too young to be allowed to watch it, and I would argue the image of a creature ‘masticating’ a soldier is a design element/visual mode directly lifted from the series, as within the first episode we observe a giant Titan biting and tearing into a human. As well as the visual aspects of this piece, the frequent

references to sound as a mode, particularly sibilant sounds – ‘scream,’ ‘snap,’ ‘call’ – add to the sense of a very cinematic vision, playing to the oral aspects of language through their onomatopoeic nature. The dialogue is, by turns, short and exclamative, or consciously phrased in a manner designed to sound archaic, choices aided by the fact that part of her family are German, and so she has a rudimentary grasp of it as a second language, and wanted to draw on its sonic landscape in her work. This assemblage of resources from *Beowulf* and manga demonstrates a cross-modal/media translation of design ideas, indicative of the power of Literature teaching being able to draw from texts and narratives across the whole spectrum of cultural content in the manner of the ‘poacher’ or bricoleur’ (Lévi-Strauss, 1966; Jenkins, 1992). Elizabeth’s engagement with the process of ‘geek club’ has not harmed her academically assessable creative writing in any way: it has, in fact, developed it, in answer to the third of the research questions - *‘How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?’*. In this instance, the productive third space between the visual and the written was found when a safe space (allowing for immersion) was established for play and experimentation (in other words, engagement). The additional factor of no judgement brought to bear on the third text choices that allowed Elizabeth, and each of the students, to meet the text of *Beowulf* on their own terms, contributed to the opportunities for immersion and engagement. As such, there is an argument to be made here for both the broadening of the KS4 National Curriculum to allow for relevance to a wider range of students, and for the reintroduction of Media into the National Curriculum, if it allows for students to immerse and engage with challenging texts more deeply via different media and modes. The study of Literature should not, in this former teacher’s opinion, feel like a chore, and acknowledging the narratives that students engage with out of choice does not ‘dumb down’

their ability to access texts. Instead, as see with this case study, it can lead them to the heart of texts viewed as ‘canon.’

Elizabeth’s engagement was such that she also wanted to bring together elements of anime with the more generic and game-based Fantasy work she had done with her game. In order to achieve this, she broke away from the text of *Beowulf* into the broader Discourses of the Fantasy genre and produced an additional poem, reproduced below,

Dragons

*Screaming, Screeching, Shrieking scaled beasts
Flying overhead and making citizens into feasts
Scalding, Simmering, Scorching flames
Destroying homes, erasing names
Flying death, tortured grace, enraged hope
Their flames engulf all in smoke
Cowering in fear, those beneath
Know of their imminent doom, praying under the wreath
Wrath incarnate, Envy embodied,
Gluttony given life, Lust alive, Sloth at work,
Greed clasping tight, Pride at its height
Rolling, Roaring, Raging creatures
Painting pain across all features
Then
Peace comes
In the form of death
To a beast as mighty as the gift of breath
From a traveller
From a faraway land
Weapon clasped firmly in hand
The creature falls to determination
It falls to their strength
To their heart of steel
So that humanity can once again heal
One day another creature may come
But that will be long after the hero is gone
For now, they live in peace
Living happily beneath the wreath.*

As with her prose writing, Elizabeth seems to be very focused on producing strong imagery and a sensory experience for her readership – perhaps, in her immersion in writing,

hoping to generate immersion for her reader. It is also no longer clear who her perceived audience is, and I found that observing her write, it appeared she was doing so because she was engaged with the idea of repurposing the generic conventions of Fantasy into a new product, and became fully immersed in the process of doing so. The resources she draws on, she explained, included the ‘How to Train Your Dragon’ franchise and the Fantasy manga/anime ‘Seven Deadly Sins’ (2014), whilst taking the idea of writing in poetic form from our study of *Beowulf* and her prior use of *Skyrim*, so we can see an act of assemblage that transcended modes and media, as associated with our redefinition of engagement. Furthermore, there is a consistency of technique across both her writing samples – the sibilant sounds, the conscious vocabulary choices – that implies an emergence of a unique writerly voice in her production, which is a pleasing academic outcome from a project that took videogame authoring as its point of origin, though the dynamic nature of the writing retains a ludic quality. Her engagement with the different modes of game making seems to have developed her sense of what can be achieved with more traditional narrative forms in assessable writing. The points of commonality across her different products are also a helpful demonstration of the interplay of traces across her textual web of meaning and the creative work she is able to produce.

Elizabeth is an example of how the *Beowulf* project broadened the writing of an already confident student, and heightened her awareness of form and genre. She was able to immerse herself in reading, writing, making, and playing, but also demonstrated strong engagement in her capacity for assembling transmedia resources into new texts. However, as previously noted, not all of the students had her advantageous starting point, but this does not mean that their outcomes were not eventually very positive.

EAL Participants

One student whose experience of both the club and of school was radically different to that of Abbie is Raphael. He is a talented artist, who loves manga and anime, and at the end of the project showed me multiple sketchbooks of characters and settings he had drawn for a computer game he wanted to make [FIG. 10], as he loved the process of game design introduced by the club so much. However, he was very

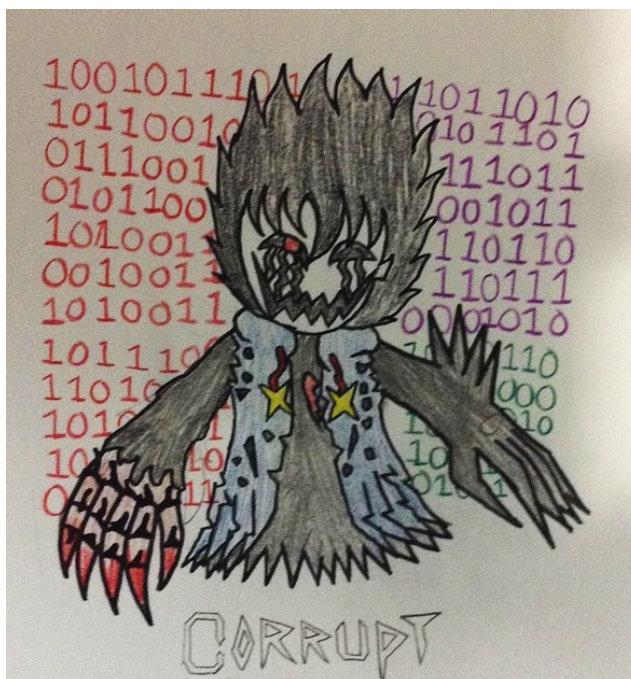


Figure 10: Raphael's character design

self-conscious about creative writing, as he felt his literacy was not as strong as students like Elizabeth and Abbie – a self-perceived lack - and is also classed as EAL (English as an additional language) as his first and home language is Spanish. As such, he found immersion in written texts very difficult, versus his game literacy, which was more advanced, with ludic multimodality being more rapidly accessed than the linguistic mode of a second language, once again calling to a reintroduction of Media studies as a strand of subject-English.

One of the first bits of creative writing Raphael produced was an attempt at writing in role as the character of Grendel, influenced by the rest of the group's playful framing of the character. As Raphael did not know where to start with a creative writing piece, we discussed Grendel as a character, and thought through how the character would feel about the events in the narrative of *Beowulf*, as the poem focuses only on the tale of Beowulf himself, modelling

the kind of semiotic resources that might be drawn upon. During this conversation, we made particular reference to Grendel's presentation in the Zemeckis film version, as having a visual/auditory reference point offered a hook to hang new writing from. Following our discussion, Raphael suggested that he found it easier to work with a character's emotions, rather than having to structure a narrative, which he perceived as 'too hard,' and utilised the social language and writing styles of the other students in the group as a resource, along with visual assistance from the film of *Beowulf*. This was an interesting point to reflect upon, as in some ways it resonated with the discussions I have with KS4 students regarding the creative writing element of their Language GCSE – in their exam, they usually have a choice of two questions, one is a *written* prompt or title that they have to use as the basis of a story, the other is a picture or *visual* prompt used to generate a description or narrative. Students who lack confidence in creative writing often gravitate towards the visual prompt because they 'don't know how to write a story,' but then struggle with the descriptive task because what they struggle with is actually structuring writing, rather than narratives as such, which they encounter in other media (predominantly television shows and games). Often, the barrier is perceived to be the fact that such students do not read enough to have a frame of reference, which completely disregards the fact that they are constantly surrounded by narrative structures in other media, which could, as third texts, be drawn on by their teachers.

The key to getting Raphael to write at all was to find his way into how to utilise visual resources and a character's projected feelings as a starting point for making new meaning. In this case, the 'productive connection' between the visual and the written modes (as discussed above with Elizabeth – RQ3) was established by working with Raphael to allow him to feel safe enough to be immersed in the written word. In a normal classroom environment, this would be reproducible with sensitive scaffolding for less confident or resistant writers, using visual

prompts that are familiar or safe for them, so they can use the narrative structures that they already know, but do not necessarily realise that they know, as the basis for their own writing.

The result of Raphael's initial work can be seen below, with the original 'errors' in punctuation and grammar in the piece reproduced to allow the reader to get a sense of Raphael's writing level,

When you're always dreaming I will always be there but bear to witness I'm no bear I am a being far from bad beyond from the depth of hell I am always there haunting you and taunting you always I will know when you're sleeping I am there witnessing you dreaming of my face . Whenever you're alone I will be waiting my heart is black as coal I will eat your soul I will wait ...I will wait.....under your bed in your closet outside your window I will always be waiting their awaiting to eat your soul and feed on your scream's . When your outside I will always be there awaiting a chance like a predator waiting for prey.

The characterisation of Grendel is sinister, creating a sense of a character that stalks and lurks, rather than focusing on his potential for graphic violence, which we can follow even with the lack of 'correct' punctuation. Raphael was interested in fight sequences in his game design, however, so the lack of overt violence in his writing here suggests a form of self-censorship to make his writing 'school-appropriate,' or that this is a build of tension before fighting commences. The desire to be accepted as a writer was strong for Raphael, but it was also a point of vulnerability as he negotiated his positionality as a linguistic 'outsider.' The Discourses of 'geek' identity were helpful here, as the rest of the group had already positioned themselves as another kind of 'outsider,' making the ownership of a liminal identity a point of belonging and commonality, rather than a factor of isolation. As an EAL student, Raphael encountered the traditional MFL teaching form of immersion in his daily school life, so finding a point of similarity with the group is likely to have been powerful for him, transforming the immersion of drowning into the immersion of safe familiarity.

The social elements that can be unpicked from Raphael's production are the use of rhyme, the play on the verb/noun forms of 'bear,' the simile 'black as coal,' the image of 'the

depths of hell,’ and some of the vocabulary choices, including, ‘taunting’ and ‘witnessing’, all of which evidence arguments made, and cited elsewhere in this thesis, regarding the social nature of language and the power of this groups’ shared meaning making (Vygotsky, 1933; Gee, 2014; Potter and McDougall, 2017). The use of rhyme particularly was influenced by Elizabeth and Yusuf, both of whom were interested in writing poetry. The wordplay with ‘bear’ comes directly from Ryan, whose approach to language unfailingly contained an element of humour, and when one of the girls told him his chatter was ‘unbearable’ and he did an impression of a bear, cementing the word’s multiple meanings in the group’s shared pool of semiotic resources. The use of the simile came from an internet search for similes after Abbie told Raphael that they were a ‘good’ thing to include in writing to ‘make it more interesting,’ demonstrating her own assimilation of the Discourses around assessable/school writing. The more advanced vocabulary choices were also derived from internet searches, after the students realised that it was possible to source synonyms online (they were unaware of this functionality being built into Microsoft Word). These influences were married together in Raphael’s writing production, adding to its complexity, and giving him the tools to engage with a range of textual resources, and with a creative form that he associated with ‘school’ rather than pleasure. Of course, this was after the original impetus to join the group was provided by videogames and gaming, and his example again suggests how engagement, via a student’s third texts, can often precede immersion. In this instance, being able to use *Beowulf* as a resource in game making and visual work encouraged Raphael to become engaged in the project. Once he had mastered these resources in modes and media he felt comfortable with, he gradually allowed himself to be immersed in writing.

Furthermore, this kind of ‘writing in role’ can be viewed as literally ‘immersive,’ as a student is putting themselves into a text to perform a role (Coles and Bryer, 2018). Taking the idea of writing-as-immersive (as opposed to reading-as-immersive, which has been discussed

more frequently so far) we can draw further parallels between writing and playing or authoring videogames. In Drama lessons or projects, students take on the words and world of a script and bring it into being by the physical elements of performance, in other words, through action, or immersion into the productive work of engagement. An argument can be made for game playing functioning in a similar way when one focuses on the ludic elements of videogames (Burn, 2021). Game authoring and writing in role operate in a similar liminal space between performing/playing and reading/other forms of writing, whereby the creative acts are inherently immersive in how they are assembled from different modes and influences. For Raphael, the process of writing became accessible by him assuming a character and writing about the experiences that character might have, and how *he* would feel about those experiences if they happened to him (ibid.). As quiet, shy boy, it is quite telling, then, that the predator he inhabited was one who haunted and stalked, rather than one who was actively aggressive, demonstrating a subtle interplay of trace. The product he created also gives us an insight into his experience of consuming texts – choosing the immediacy of being in-role in a game, rather than any other form of media consumption.

Having found that he *was* able to produce more extended writing, and in a space where he was not immediately critiqued on the basis of grammar and punctuation (this itself being a critique of the derivative focus of the current English Language curriculum), Raphael then became more willing to experiment with writing, rather than just creating mini-games on MissionMaker or drawing, though he still felt he was ‘bad’ at it, highlighting the ‘safeness’ aspect of immersion. His response to his self-perceived weaknesses was to spend several of the extra-curricular sessions working with me to craft and hone a short story, again utilising an online thesaurus to develop his vocabulary. All of the students in the group were very focused on ‘good vocabulary,’ which is both a hangover from KS2 ‘Literacy’ teaching, and a symptom

of teachers over-adapting to the 2013 GCSE overhaul, which saw the mark schemes for the GCSE English Language creative writing questions explicitly demonstrate a prioritisation of fluent vocabulary use. Observing this behaviour across students from different English classes and sets caused me to reconsider my own teaching approach, as it felt that English teaching had moved too far towards focusing on skills rather than creativity, especially as this was witnessed in a club focusing on writing inspired by computer game design.

Raphael's writing speed was slowed by his intense focus on finding 'the right words', but he obviously wanted to demonstrate that he had writing skills that were similar to his peers in terms of creating a product that was polished. The following is *Beowulf: Time Slayer*, which he had completed by the end of a process taking around three weeks:

You might think you know the story of Beowulf but these are the events that history has never told. One peaceful morning (well what turned out to be one cataclysmic morning) Grendel was on a rampage annihilating everything in its path. Then the tremendous bulk Beowulf came to end the massacre and crisis.

"End you I will," cried Beowulf.

As he gripped his sturdy axe, while Grendel leaped into action he bore his claws filled with the blood of a million souls crying for help. Grendel's claws were strong but Beowulf's axe was mightier. Just about when they were going to clash in to a battle greater than any of history's fights a mystic dark portal emerged. Then as Grendel was going to slash Beowulf. Grendel plundered into the darkness of the portal then Beowulf followed as they both got sucked into the gloomy portal.

Raphael's work here is a piece of writing that, though containing the occasional lapse in standard grammar, communicates a clear idea of narrative direction and generic conventions. Significantly, the 'quality' of writing, considered from a teacherly perspective, has improved from the piece reproduced above, which I would argue is down to Raphael becoming increasingly motivated to work in a manner similar to the other students in the group, and being willing to draft and redraft his writing (further evidence of the possible power of immersion and engagement). As he was interested in the potential for 'fight sequences' in the original narrative of *Beowulf*, it seems natural that Raphael developed his narrative around action, but

it is clear that he had a sense of narrative direction, and had moved away from just writing about a character's feelings, indicating a developing, assessable competency (RQ3).

Though he references a number of conventions from the Fantasy and Action genres, Raphael's writing also contains some direct references to Science Fiction through two moments inspired by the *Star Wars* franchise, which functioned as his 'third text.' The seventh *Star Wars* film, *The Force Awakens* (2015) was one that Raphael had seen fairly recently, and it operated as a cultural reference point (and semiotic resource) amongst the students in the extra-curricular group. Beowulf's, 'End you I will,' is a direct reference to the syntactical style of Yoda, a character from the original *Star Wars* films, whilst the line, 'million souls crying for help,' similarly echoes the classic film line, 'I felt a great disturbance in the Force, as if millions of voices suddenly cried out in terror...' Demonstrating that an interest in the more recent film in the franchise led to Raphael engaging with the wider universe it was part of, as Abbie does with *Doctor Who*, leading to the construction of a new text. Raphael also felt more at home with visual texts, whether games or films, so it was powerful for him to have these reference points legitimated by the space of the *Beowulf* club. As quite an introverted character, lacking confidence in his academic ability I found it pleasing as a teacher to see him 'owning' a creative writing task. The ability to blend the textual resources of his third texts with *Beowulf* allowed Raphael to become engaged, and to start to overcome his issues with self-confidence. During some of the other visually oriented work, he then went on to appear fully immersed, particularly when he was drawing or involved in making stop motion animation.

Claudia, another 'EAL' student in the group, had similar concerns about her writing to Raphael, but had been in the UK for less time and had not yet developed much confidence with writing or speaking in English. She expressed that she enjoyed Fantasy as her preferred genre, and enjoyed reading UK or US fantasy books in translation. Claudia did not feel comfortable

enough to write in English after the game design segment of the club was finished, but she did write the start of a *Beowulf*-inspired story in Spanish, her home language.

Beginning, *‘Despues de derrotar a la madre de Grendel, decide no volver al lugar donde empezo todo, elige ir a una de las aldeas que hay abandonada en el norte de Suecia, donde hace diez anos, le contaron que alli se podia reunir con el espiritu de un familiar querido.’* Or ‘After defeating Grendel's mother, he decides not to return to the place where it all began, he chooses to go to one of the abandoned villages in the north of Sweden, where ten years ago, he was told that there he could meet with the spirit of a dear relative.’ Though my translation only really communicates the spirit of Claudia's story, rather than the power of the specific language choices she makes, we can still see the tropes of epic Fantasy family-sagas – lost family members, quests across a dangerous landscape, demonstrating how Discourses are not necessarily bound by linguistic divisions. Her narrative (in translation) continues,

The trip lasted exactly six days, but Beowulf did not care, since he would be reunited with his mother, whom he had lost 4 years ago ... When he got there, he saw that the village was destroyed, they had collapsed all the houses of each one of the inhabitants of there and that in that part of the north of Sweden there was not a soul. Beowulf wasn't afraid of anything, but just being there gave him goosebumps. He went to the small forest that was at the back of the village, just as he had been told and began to say aloud all the things related to his father, his full name, his age, hair-eye colour ...

After about 10 minutes his vision began to blur because of what he had just done, he thought that that was the price for meeting his mother, but he was wrong, a lot ...

This is an important reminder that EAL students are not necessarily students who are academically ‘less able,’ as Claudia clearly does have a good grasp of how to construct a narrative: her struggle is in how to express herself at the level she wants to in a language she is only just learning. Being able to write in her home language was freeing, as was constructing a narrative in the form of a videogame, and this was her motivation for participating in the club – to be able to express her creative ideas without feeling as if she was being teacher-marked for grammar. For both Claudia and Raphael, students with very different experiences, we observe the repressiveness of subject-English sitting alongside the immersive (MFL-sense)

experience of learning English to be able to function socially and culturally as residents of London. The rigidity of Discourses around school ‘correctness’ are clearly detrimental to both students, and this is a form of alienation I found difficult to reconcile as a teacher within that same system.

As well as being inspired by fantasy and manga, Claudia wrote in this manner after watching the Robert Zemeckis’ (2007) adaptation of *Beowulf*, which she found visually striking. She wanted to capture the kind of tensions represented in the film, as she found having a visual rendering of the poem’s narrative helped her to understand what was going on, and we get a strong sense of both the setting and Beowulf’s character in the piece. Through her focusing on what is visual, and the immediate experience of the main character, we can possibly see the film of *Beowulf* as Claudia’s ‘third text,’ but nonetheless, this visual text still provided an entry point for her engagement with the project, as it did with Raphael. The dive into Beowulf’s family, and the idea of magic, however, moves away from the film, and into manga and anime, an interest she shared with Elizabeth. Interestingly, the two girls were able to share a love for anime on equal terms, as they were able to watch the same programs dubbed either in English or Spanish, so their access to these multimodal, animated texts was not limited by a language barrier. *Beowulf* was also, in fact, always already a translated text for the whole cohort, as none of the students arrived at the project with a fluent command of Old English. As such, gaming and creating off the text simply added additional layers of translation to their creative production, or at least took the text as a series of resources to be repurposed, meaning the process was democratic and accessible to all of the students, regardless of their background – it became a ‘safe’ text in a ‘safe’ (third) space, so when this is taken into consideration, it is perhaps unsurprising that the students were able to immerse themselves in the text, and chose to engage with it as a set of materials to transform.

As with the other students whose work has been explored so far, Claudia had been able to find a way into accessing *Beowulf*, engaging with its details, and, using those details, taking the ownership to make something new, despite the difficulties of the source text. With the creative successes of the group, it becomes increasingly possible to argue that, meeting a student halfway, with whatever narrative forms, in whatever modes, they are already familiar with it is possible to generate powerful forms of engagement leading into academic immersion in the task of writing, via a trace of their wider experiences.

Stop Motion Animation

One form of creation that generated notable immersion and engagement, and led to some more enthusiastic writing, amongst every single member of the group was stop motion animation. Even more so than the boys stress-testing the MissionMaker software, this process became an anarchic form of play that became a key moment in the group's identity.

Using a combination of Lego minifigs, Minecraft figures [FIG.11], voice, drawings, handwriting, and iPads creating found-image backdrops, the students assembled two different multimodal versions of moments of the

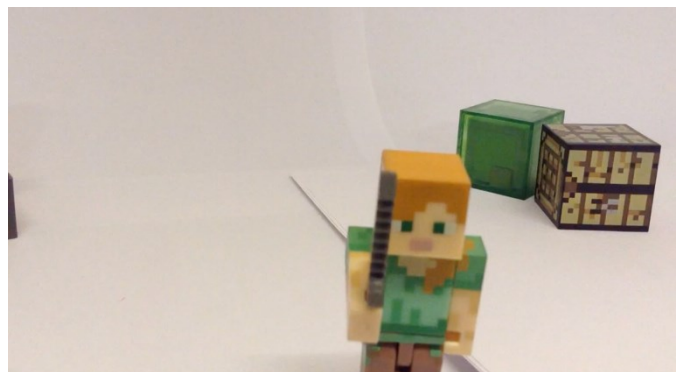


Figure 11: Stop motion animation still

Beowulf narrative. The chaotic working conditions of the students were balanced by moments of engaged, creative decision-making, or silent points of immersive filmmaking. It is possible to argue that the stop motion animation sessions represented the peak of the students' immersion and engagement, as they cycled through both states independently, requiring very little input from myself. The immersive trace, it could be argued, was offered by the ways in which the students had already rehearsed their appropriation of *Beowulf* through other media,

alongside their social relations, and their established third texts. Of course, it was also possible to see, very clearly, how well the students had come to understand *Beowulf*, through the ways they were able to draw from it. This is very much a school Discourse-acceptable outcome, as the students had accessed a challenging literary text (RQ3). At the same time, the product they created out of their shared designs and social language, and individual third texts, was something that was unique to the group and free from the limitations of curriculum assessment.

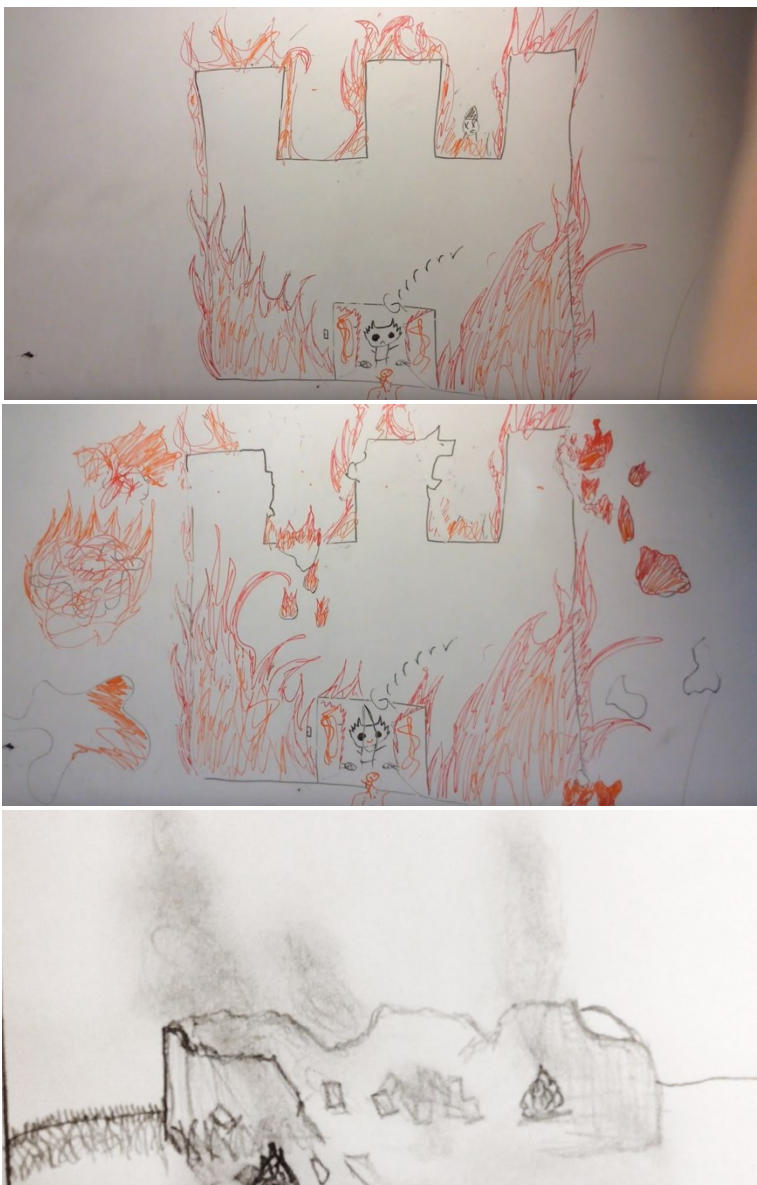


Figure 12: Stop motion animation stills

The third texts were physically realised in this form of production, through the use of Lego and Minecraft figures, but also through drawings to carry the narrative forward where the figures would not suffice, as each student layered traces of themselves and their influences into the final product [FIG 12]. This physicality placed all of the students on an even playing field, and it meant that no one person took charge of the direction of the group as they all had an equal ability to create: they just decided what they wanted to communicate, and cooperated to

make it happen. This was a significant point of transition from the start of the project where the students divided themselves by gender and preferred to work alone. The teambuilding that

occurred whilst the students explored stop motion animation led them to want to continue the group after the close of my research, and meant that they created a space in which to continue to explore different forms of creativity.

The images from the stop motion animation above demonstrate the different contributions from the group, working towards their common aim. The destruction of the hall was initially drawn on the classroom whiteboard, and then its final state was drawn in one of the student's art books. The Minecraft figures stood in for Beowulf and Grendel in their key fight. Whilst these scenes were being created, Ryan wrote and rehearsed a voice over, layering another mode on the final product. In many ways, this part of the project meets the third research question - *How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?* - head on, as we observe the productive connections, the third space, but we also see a group of children deeply immersed and engaged in a joyous act of creation.

After Beowulf

After the final stages of the formal *Beowulf* project, the students were still interested in maintaining 'Geek Club' as a social (third) space, so for the remainder of the academic year, inspired by the idea of game making and non-curriculum forms of creativity, the students continued to use my classroom as a meeting space. Mostly, the students wanted a reason to spend time with each other, as their friendships were unconventional within the normal social structures of the school, but they were also interested in taking what they had done with *Beowulf* and using their experimentation with different creative forms to continue to 'make' things in a way that would not normally be facilitated in an English classroom.

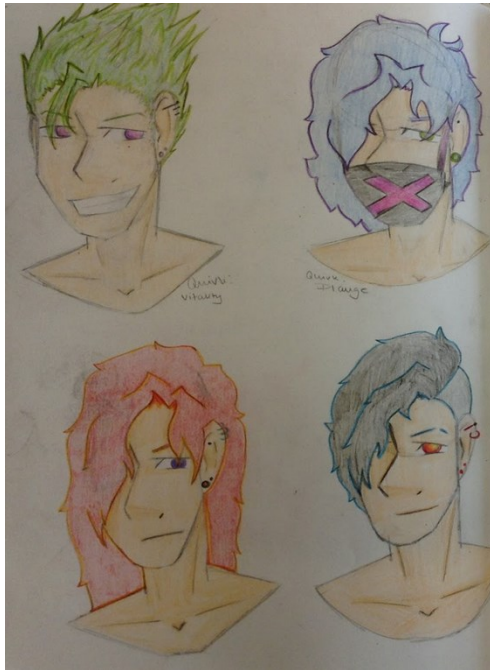


Figure 13: Elizabeth's manga characters

Elizabeth, who as has been discussed is quite a reflective student, interrogated what she did and did not like about MissionMaker after the game-making process was complete. She concluded that character customisation was something that she enjoyed (*Skyrim* again being given as an example of ideal practice), but that was missing from that iteration of the program. Given the extended club time to play, she created different character designs for a game she would like to make, utilising the stylistics and representational

Discourses of Manga. Her character designs [FIG. 13] represent character attributes, for example the character in the upper left is 'Vitality,' and the upper right is 'Plague,' but there were many others, including characters representing the sun, moon, and stars, which she imagined as a family, indicating that, though she was focused on visual design, there was also an emergent narrative in her mind for a complete product. Her designs pull from modes she was familiar with before the project – manga and anime, Fantasy as a genre -, supplemented with the idea of game design that occupied her time throughout the club. The shift here is that she now views game design as a form she has mastered and can engage with on her own terms. She appeared to feel as if the resources of game design had simply become another set of tools,

broadening her creative repertoire for anything she wants to, or is academically directed to, create, whereas previously games were just something that were ‘done’ as a player.

Raphael also spent a lot of time designing characters, filling entire sketch books with them, the designs often shared amongst the group for approval indicating a new willingness to engage in distribution as a domain of practice. In the images in [FIG. 14] he built on the idea of ‘creating-in-role’ by designing a character called ‘Evil Raphael,’ putting himself into an imagined game as a character. It could be suggested that this decision was inspired by the work he did throughout the *Beowulf* club, and furthermore, it is interesting how this can be seen as



Figure 14: Raphael's character designs

linked with MissionMaker itself, as Raphael's experience of game-making had only occurred through the program, which works with a first-person perspective, rather than an avatar you can see for yourself. This experience forces the both the writer and the

user/gamer to assume themselves as the narrative perspective of the game. It can also be argued to be evidence of an emerging sense of immersion in his creative practice. The process of game design as being character-led, rather than led by narrative or a sense of ludic possibilities, in student creative production emerges here, and seems an idea that would be an interesting space for further research.

Even though Raphael made a lot of progress with his writing over the course of the *Beowulf* project, in the end, given free choice, he returned to drawing as the mode of communication he felt most comfortable with. This does not mean the steps forward he took with words were lost, however, as, like Elizabeth, his character designs suggested a wider idea

of a narrative. It appeared that, through designing games, and thinking about designing games, the students did reflect on how stories are constructed. To test this hint further, the *Macbeth* project discussed in the following chapters was designed to ensure that students' follow-up work was in the form of writing, so there could be further exploration of the links between game design and the style of writing required for the English Language GCSE (RQ3).

After the *Beowulf* club finally came to a close Raphael approached me with a script that he had written in his own time, drawing on the writing form his peers had experimented with. He had spent less supported time crafting the 'correct' grammar than he had during the club, but after being part of the study, he felt empowered to try and write the words that went with his pictures, as can be seen in the opening stage direction below,

Scene: Destroyed City

Infinite wants to kill Leo as he sees him as depression that has taken form and Leo is in a world where everything is destroyed, which links to Leo's life breaking apart.

Leo is walking around a destroyed city that looks to be London in rubble and everything is destroyed and fire everywhere and it looks like an earthquake went past or in hell.

What this fragment implies is that, once the cycle of immersion and engagement is established, often through the use of the third text, students find confidence in their ownership of a broader range of readings and writings. Though the grammar is non-standard, the vocabulary suggests a rich visual imagination, influenced by gaming and Science Fiction, that Raphael has started to feel able to articulate. The content of the fragment is emotionally bleak, but after appropriate safeguarding protocol for the school was conformed to, Raphael confirmed that the feelings discussed were fictional, and designed with a view to immerse an audience. In a very real way, Raphael had, through experimenting with visual, creative work, found a productive connection with assessable writing, which is what this project strove towards.

Abbie's direction post-*Beowulf* was different to the rest of the group: she realised, at some point during the *Beowulf* club, that dialogue in games must be scripted, so she decided to use her time for script writing, which can be seen as a similar decision to the one made by Elizabeth in her character designs. As we can see in her plan [FIG. 15], she got Elizabeth to give her feedback on her original ideas. The use of green pen as an additional mode is an interesting interjection of school Discourse into the

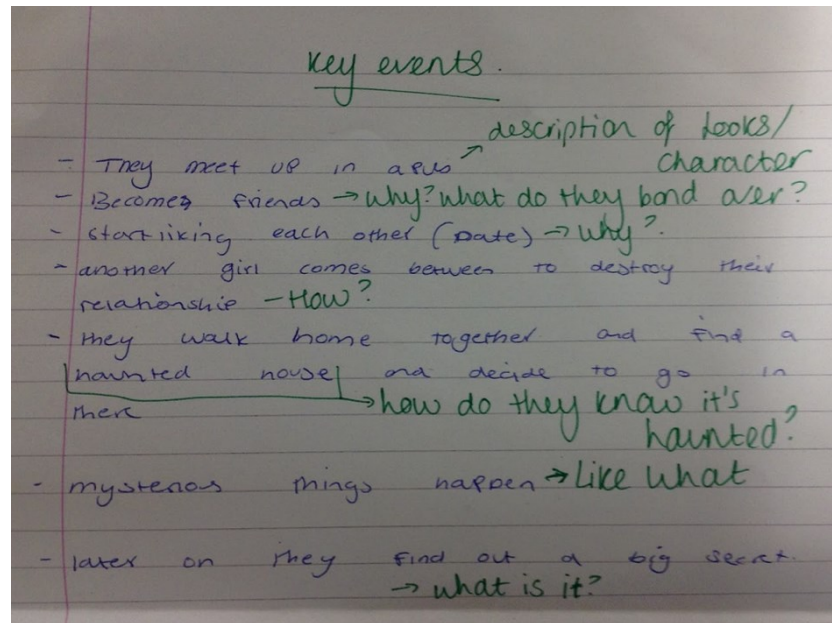


Figure 15: Abbie's script planning

extra-curricular third space, as green pen is used by students to offer peer feedback, or to improve their own work (red pen is used by teachers). Elizabeth's responses to Abbie's skeleton narrative are very direct, as she challenges Abbie to think more deeply about how her narrative would move forward. This confidence of critique was unusual for Elizabeth, as she generally presented as quiet and reflective, so it could be read as a product of the social bonds of the group, as well as a result of the immersion in and engagement with the project, as she now felt that she had a command of how narratives should work and be driven forward. The fact that she provided feedback using a green pen also implies that she does not see Abbie's writing as alienated from the kind of writing completed during a normal school day. In this case, it appears that the third space of the extra-curricular club has a strong overlap with the personal and school sphere's the girls inhabit, implying that third texts function very well in assisting students in finding productive third space between assessable and creative work (RQ3). Though this is not the strongest piece of data produced by this part of the project, it does provide a starting point

for thinking about how students, rather than researchers and academics, view their experiences and understand their own relationships between school, home, and ‘other.’ It has appeared, throughout this section of the research that students see the division of spaces less starkly than adults, and are happy to pull resources from any space, text, media, or mode, in order to socially interact and to communicate their ideas. This brings us back to the idea of ‘third texts’ influencing how students are able to access texts that are unfamiliar or challenging to them (immersion) and how they go onto repurpose them (engagement). This also suggests that teachers should not be afraid of leveraging any form of third text to help bridge a students’ familiar narrative forms and what they must write or analyse for school.

Concluding Thoughts

To refocus on the research, when we return to the second and third research questions underpinning this work, ‘*What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*’ and ‘*Can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between visual creative work ... and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?*’ Then we can see that, for the former of these questions, one condition for immersion an engagement is the availability of third texts for students to use to make sense of the new text they are studying. For the latter question, we have seen that, yes, in this case study, as the conditions for immersion and engagement were created through game design, then stop motion animation, a productive space for GCSE-style writing was created and exploited. For the more confident students, immersion in the traditional narrative form of *Beowulf* led them to opportunities to engage with broader making and the more social aspects of literacy. For others, the opportunity to experience engagement in practical making tasks developed their confidence, which then allowed them to feel textual safety enough to immerse in reading, writing, and playing. Whichever state was the point of entry, however, it became

quite clear during the span of the club that the students moved between states quite naturally – lending credence to my suggest of the cyclical relationship between the two. Additionally, as a then-teacher, the experience caused me to re-evaluate the way in which I taught literary texts, as it became clear that creative engagement was a powerful pedagogical tool.

The experience of running this initial study, even as a less experienced MA-level researcher, demonstrated that game making, and tasks around game making, could be used to generate interesting creative and transactional writing. As such, this experience then led into the planning for the *Playing Macbeth* study, the data for which is the focus for the next chapters. It also provided a data-centric preliminary counterpoint to the National Curriculum idea of Literacy and ‘English’ that provided one of the points of tension that drove the direction of this thesis: that the limiting of text choice and the stripping of Media as an area of Literacy removes some of the conditions which allow for students to become immersed in the study of Literature, thereby damaging the outcomes that the NC seeks to achieve.

In many ways, the privileging of certain sign-making processes over others connects with Kress’ discussion of Social Semiotics and how adults validate certain forms of communication in children, whilst others are relegated to ‘play’, and subjected to no further consideration (Kress, 1997). When children play – whether through ‘make believe’ as small children, or through formalised ‘gaming’ as adolescents – we are able to witness immersion and engagement as they are defined by this thesis, and so we have to question what is lost by a curriculum strictly excluding meaning that is generated playfully? As has been discussed at length in this chapter, and extended in the following one, meaning generated socially and through ‘play’ can have more traditionally ‘academic’ benefits for students in terms of their ability to self-reflect, and their confidence in ‘owning’ writing inspired by non-standard school experiences.

7. Analysis and Discussion: Playing *Macbeth*

As highlighted in the previous chapters, the original research questions for this thesis focused on the development of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ as education-focused concepts, and enquired if ‘productive’ third spaces between ‘creative’ and exam-driven student work might be fostered through the development of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ in students. The data generated through the *Beowulf* project has indicated that the fostering of ‘immersion’ and ‘engagement’ can, in fact, generate positive academic outcomes both in terms of student work and in student involvement, as well as in terms of students developing their language use for social settings. This chapter, then, will test if these findings can be echoed in a whole-class group, rather than in a small, extra-curricular setting.

To first revisit the research questions underpinning this work, we ask again, ‘*How can immersion and engagement be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?*’ Through exploring the terms defined in the theory chapter alongside the first of the case studies, we can observe how, framing the interactions of the students through immersion and engagement as the primary concepts means that the terms are useful for describing the intersections between the social, creative, and academic spheres. Returning to the second and third questions, ‘*What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*’ and ‘*How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?*’ We have already observed how social interaction, feelings of ‘safety’ or familiarity, and the utilisation of ‘third texts’ are key indicators in the creation of immersion and engagement. It has also been evident that visual creative work *can* be the basis for the skills and forms required of GCSE English Language-style writing. The function of this chapter, therefore, is to explore how the RQs can be applied

to a similar, though different case study, and to test if the findings support the conclusions of the previous study, or to consider how they might challenge what was previously found.

Reflecting on Exams, Students, and COVID-19

The cohort that this chapter focuses on proved to be unique in an unexpected way: they were the first Year 11 cohort sent home into COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, unable to sit their GCSEs. They were then also the first cohort to sit their formal A Level examinations again, after the two-year period of disruption.

Conducted before COVID-19 disrupted the very nature of English education, and before the students involved would face the cancellation of their GCSE exams, the first phase of this project was ‘sold’ to a full class of Year 10 students as an alternative way of developing their knowledge of *Macbeth*, one of their GCSE set texts. The class were my own ‘top set’ of girls, originally academically streamed as the most able of their cohort for English, but then mixed with students from other groups, relocated for the purposes of behaviour management. My observations of their working and the outcomes of the day (along with subsequent writing, plus interviews) is rooted in both my own research practice, *and* my role as their classroom teacher, a divided state more fully unpacked in the methodology chapter. This second case study represents a different set of relationships and different stakes than those involved in the *Beowulf* project, as this intervention took place in school time, with a GCSE class, so there was a heightened pressure that the students ‘learn’ something in the sense of traditional English classroom Discourse.

Had their exams gone ahead as usual, the students in this class would have sat two English Literature and two English Language GCSE papers. *Macbeth* would have comprised half of their Literature Paper 1 in the form of an extract-based essay question, alongside a

similar style of question on *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella. The skills assessed by these questions include the ability to respond accurately to a question, knowledge of the text and its language, critical analysis, understanding of the effect of a text on its reader, and the effect of context on a writer and on the reception of the text. The GCSE Language papers they would have sat would have demanded the skills of comprehension, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, but also the skill set required to create fiction and non-fiction creative writing.

As this chapter progresses, it will become clear that at least some of these key GCSE skills can arguably be demonstrated in the 'writing' of a game rather than an essay, thereby helping students to understand the shape of a challenging texts, empowering them to use both text and process effectively in an exam situation. Additionally, the design of this case study incorporated follow-on writing tasks inspired by the kind of question styles presented by the English Language Papers, namely narrative and transactional writing, in order to broaden the positive outcomes of the students' experience. This will be explored in the following chapter.

The multimodality of the game making process required students to be able to construct narrative and play using different visual and written resources, whilst also accounting for the ludic elements of what a game needs to account for in being a game (Kress and van Leeuwen, 2006; Kress, 1997; Bezemer and Kress, 2015; Burn, 2015; Ensslin, 2014; Calleja, 2011; Ryan, 2013). Furthermore, the students needed to draw on multiple literacies in order to construct games with understandable grammars, and to be able to communicate in a coherent way within the social setting of the class (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000; Gee, 1992). These findings add to the data recorded during the *Beowulf* project, lending credibility to game design as a valid intervention in teaching students about difficult narratives, and how to construct narratives of their own.

With the class involved being a ‘high stakes’ GCSE class, representing the top end of their cohorts’ predicted grades and therefore important for the school in terms of progression data, it was necessarily important to me as their teacher that the experience have relevance to their exams, rather than being a day off for ‘play,’ though there exists plenty of scholarship that argues the validity of play as a form of learning (Vygotsky, 1933; Heathcote et al., 1984; Burn, 2021; Coles et al., 2023). Regarding the students’ own relationship to the *Macbeth* day, it was also important that *they* see the academic value of it to ensure their participation and compliance, as despite their status as ‘top set,’ the character of the class was not what one might stereotypically expect from a group of high-achieving girls, both in terms of negative behaviour, and in the strength of personality to argue against anything they felt was a ‘waste of time.’ The experience needed to be perceived as useful, and to assist students with their understanding of the text, though there is, of course, much discussion that could be had around the idea of ‘value’ in education, and the status schools apply to student data over student experience.

The *Macbeth* Study Day

As described in the Methodology, the study day with the Year 10 girls ‘top set’ class occurred in a computer room, with the students using MissionMaker on desktop PCs, paper copies of the scene their groups had been assigned, and their books and full play texts from their ‘usual’ English lessons. In practical terms, this led to students experiencing the day as multimodal across screen and page. Approximately half of the students elected to annotate their scene before opening the *MissionMaker* program, hinting that levels of confidence with new technologies were variable. The process of annotation mimicked English classroom practices they were more familiar with, as annotation for ‘key quotations,’ it became apparent, was a deeply ingrained process, and part of classroom Discourses of ‘learning.’ It could be argued

that visible annotation created a sense of ‘achievement’ for students, as it created evidence of ‘work’, in a form they could use to learn textual details for examinations. It could also be argued that this kind of work serves a social function (in the language of Social Semiotics), as meaning is made through the representation of quotation as synecdoche, but also interactionally through the trade of English Literature rendered as learnable facts (Burn, 2021).

The drive for students to find ‘key quotations’, and to learn English content as a series of ‘facts’ as they might do for other subjects is, I found consistently throughout my own time as a teacher, a process that is useful only in a limited sense. However, students adopt routines in a manner that could be understood as ‘schemas’ (Radford, 2005) or as a way of managing cognitive load (Tindall-Ford, Agostinho and Sweller, 2020), but are essentially techniques of managing feeling overwhelmed by unfamiliar text. The data from this thesis suggests that teaching narrative through creative work, particularly game design, is another way of managing the anxieties surrounding the hard work of Shakespeare by recontextualising details like quotations in a more immersed understanding of narrative. Spatialising narrative through mapping a game positions students within the text, as they form their own idea of how an avatar sits within their target narrative, activating their understanding of the text in a different way.

Though the learning of decontextualized quotations does not serve as sufficient grounding for the highest achieving English Literature students, the process of mining and marking a physical text for meaning and re-use is both a revision *and* an in-exam extract skill that students use to demarcate what they perceive as important to the wider narrative. In this instance, the marked-out text demonstrated students trying to summarise the scene they had been given for narrative content to transform into game-action, and possibly also to select parts of script to use as in-game text or dialogue. In the analytic framework of the previous chapter, this could be viewed as part of the assemblage of semiotic resources as part of a design, arguably proto-multimodal as they are anticipating where text might be a jumping-off point for

other modes that can be used in game design. By applying visual markers to printed text, students used familiar skills in order to access game design as something less familiar. This initial step, observed across the majority of the class, can be seen as academic engagement – the use of a familiar process to secure access to, and hopefully mastery over, a text – however it also demonstrates a critical engagement with the text, in determining what elements of it are most important for use in a task. The act of re-purposing, assembling, and self-critiquing appears, to my eye, to promote a deeper degree of student reflexivity than might otherwise be seen.

The interplay of what could be considered a third space intervention between the formal- and home time available to students is perhaps less obvious in this case study than it was in the form of the extra-curricular club for the *Beowulf* students, as the *Macbeth* study day was a during-school project. It is important, therefore, to pause here and renegotiate what ‘third space’ can mean in the context of this thesis. In the previous chapters, the extra-curricular club was the obvious third space, but can that description be applied to something occurring during the school day? Is it enough that the normal flow of text-teaching was punctuated by gaming, introducing a trace of home-space into the school location? Resolving these questions is important for this project, as it underpins the extent to which this research has utility for classroom teachers. I would argue that the third space created here is not necessarily about games, or about timetabling. Instead, I propose that a third space can be opened in any classroom where the teacher creates space for students to bring their own experiences and their own third texts to bear on their formal learning. The division of home/school is a false dichotomy when these spaces cannot help but overlap in the experience of the student. No one space exists without a trace of the other. The *Macbeth* day is an example of how this can work, though an imperfect one, as the rest of the chapter will outline.

During the study day planned between myself, Professor Andrew Burn and Dr Bruno De Paula, the two visiting researchers, my thesis supervisors, worked with the class leading on the technical aspects of the day, whilst I, as class teacher, ran the logistics of providing students with resources and directions as to which section of the play their games should relate to. I selected both the groups and the scenes, - which, as mentioned in the later interview with Aiko, resulted in some students having to quickly familiarise themselves with unfamiliar scenes and display greater problem-solving skills – and facilitated in terms of behaviour management, making the experience feel more ‘classroom’ and less ‘free time.’

Eventually, the day resulted in several interesting partial games, but also a number of moments of disruptive behaviour, which in itself provides a point of reflection. As has already been highlighted, a ‘top set’ of girls exhibiting unfocused behaviour may contravene the stereotype of what one may expect to see in a classroom environment –so the moments where students were not engaged or immersed in the process were just as useful to this project as the moments where students were on task, in terms of usable data. Further comment could also be made about the expectations, the pre-held stereotypes, one may have regarding gender, ability, and the nature of the task – video game design, and how the experience mapped onto or challenged these expectations, as the Discourses around girls, and high-achievers – still held particular weight in this school.

Though the ‘negative cases’ will be discussed towards the end of this chapter, it is important to note that some of the student-perceived ‘lack of progress,’ and one of the limitations of the day, was due to the technical issues created by problems with the computer provision in the school, but also by bugs in the software. Of the school provision, the issues included computers not working, crashing, or running slowly, and, more interestingly, students requiring passwords resetting, suggesting that they do not regularly access school IT provision.

The problems with quality of the school's computer provision, and the lack of technological skills, even at a basic level, were a significant point of reflection for me, writing this thesis after two GCSE exam seasons being disrupted by lockdowns and related student absences. There are many barriers to student engagement, but IT skills and IT provision should be easy for schools to negotiate, and prioritised so that students leave school prepared for work that will almost inevitably require a degree of computer *and* media literacy. However, the shift in ICT curriculum, and removal of Media work from the English curriculum fails to account for this (Connolly, 2021; Green and Connolly, 2022).

As the ramifications of lack of practical IT skills for online learning after the COVID19 school closures were both huge and detrimental to the progression of the whole school cohort, it suggests that interventions like the *Playing Macbeth* project contribute to education in the form of promoting multiliteracies amongst students (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000). Additionally, there are further technology-based implications for my own practice, as, though I had access to technology-focused teaching spaces, the limitations created by the National Curriculum left little space for me to adapt my pedagogy to more fluently embed technology, and so the format of the *Macbeth* study day allowed for my teaching to be both curriculum relevant, but also supportive of students developing digital literacy (Keppell, Souter and Riddle, 2012).

For the *Macbeth* study day, the technical issues or IT skill-limitation elicited some of the poor behaviour presented by certain members of the class. Where the attendees for the extra-curricular club, as previously noted, were motivated to work through technical difficulties, the whole-class project saw students view the day as an extension of 'work,' and therefore reacted against technology presenting a barrier to their perceived progress towards their GCSEs. Unlike the students in the *Beowulf* club, some participants in the whole class setting struggled to find the resilience to overcome issues with the software, indicating a

rupture in their immersion in the process of game design. To an extent, the students' anxieties surrounding their academic progress is understandable, but conversely, their sole focus on English-as-content is a fairly bleak demonstration of the post-2013 academic landscape, as students have been trained to think of learning only in terms of its exchange value. Pedagogically, here we must consider how to demarcate in-timetable third spatial learning more carefully in future projects, in order to attempt to counteract disillusionment with the curriculum and consequent student mindset.

Despite the technical disruption, an equal number of girls demonstrated a deeper level of immersion and engagement than I would have expected them to achieve, based on my experiences of their usual classroom behaviour. As I have previously suggested, the conditions for immersion are that the immersed person experience a, 'sense of safety or comfort in the space of 'reading' and in the text itself,' that the target is, 'able to find themselves in some way reflected in the text', that they feel, 'a shifted sense of presence,' and that the state allows for, 'a building confidence that can lead beyond the narrative to engagement as a form of play within and around the [original] text.' Technological disruption should, then, naturally prevent a student from achieving any of these conditions, but for some participants this was not the case, as has been observed with the *Beowulf* group.

What this reminds us of is that immersion and engagement are linked concepts, so, I would suggest, the students who became *engaged* with either their target narrative, or with the process of game making, were sufficiently motivated to continue to create, leading back to an immersed state over time. In light of these observations, I am confident in arguing that we can only understand immersion and engagement as forming a cyclical relationship, and not prioritise one of the terms as the 'first' or 'primary' phase. With the *Beowulf* group, the key indicator in students becoming immersed or engaged was how well they were able to use their third texts, of whatever medium, as a bridge between their lived experience and the text that

became their object of study. As I will now discuss, through the work of a student sample from the target class for the *Macbeth* project, we can see an emergence of a similar pattern here.

Leah

During the study day, Leah was assigned the scene from *Macbeth* that concerns Banquo's murder under the orders of Macbeth, and his son's escape in order to fulfil one of the witches' visions of the future of Scotland – Act 3 Scene 3. Originally, she was in a group with a friend and engaged in a lot of discussion about the simple mechanics of what a game or game level 'needed' to be – confronting the Discourse of game definition by deciding one has to encounter a difficulty and 'solve' it - but after her friend left for an appointment and she had to work on her own there was a marked shift in her approach, which could possibly imply there needs to be exploration of immersion and engagement that runs parallel with peer interaction and a 'social' model of literacy, as already indicated by the *Beowulf* study.

As well as intuitively engaging with the Discourse of what delimits 'games' from other media, Leah's work is also, as noted previously, situated within the Discourses of 'English Literature,' 'school,' and 'learning' or 'productivity,' which means her positionality in terms of meaning making is pulled between free creativity, and the need to demonstrate textual comprehension. The stratum of design however, if we refer back to the framework used in the previous chapter, is more difficult to apply here. We can consider the pulling of key quotations from the script as the assembling of design choices, perhaps, but it becomes difficult to clearly see where design merges into the stratum of production. As such, it is more productive here to analyse Leah's work through a different framework, also drawn from Kress and van Leeuwen but clarified by Burn, that of the communicative acts, or 'metafunctions', of 'representation,' 'interaction,' and 'organisation' (Burn, 2021). In this framework, we can refocus on Leah's

choices as her process of communicating something about *Macbeth* through the medium of game design.



Figure 16: Student game demonstration

Moving away from a simple narrative whereby you, as Banquo, try to escape three murderers, drawing directly from the text, Leah decided to make her game a moral quest, positioning the player/avatar as the scene's 'third murderer.' She wanted to place the player in a situation where Banquo unavoidably dies, staying true to the text, but then forcing them to make the decision whether to let Banquo's son Fleance go, or whether to try and kill him. From the original text Leah already 'knew' that Fleance escapes by chance, but she saw this brief moment as an ambiguity (and opportunity for a Derridean supplement, or the trace of an untold story) offering the opportunity to explore a minor character in the plays' motivations, as well as a chance to create a more interesting example of the metafunction of representation. This action was represented through Leah using an outside 'set' as the location, and several more outdoor spaces linked to the starting 'room' to allow for a larger space for the character to run, carefully considering how a designer might plan for the metafunction of interaction for a player [FIG. 16].

The representation of the Scottish landscape provided by MissionMaker and chosen by Leah implies a communicative relationship between her as the designer and the player, moving us into considering the metafunction of interaction. Her creative choices place her audience in a relation to the original and remediated text of *Macbeth*, and also situate them in relation to a role they are expected to fill, fusing the metafunctions of representation and interaction in a

way that would be separate in other kinds of media (Burn and Schott, 2004). The affordance of the exterior setting (as opposed to an interior space) allows for the increased opportunity of Fleance's escape, as well as implying a greater freedom of choice for the player/avatar with what they can do to follow the narrative, even if this freedom in Leah's design of play is illusory. The player/avatar is guided in the broad direction of the narrative of the original play, but feel as if their choices may have consequences outside of it (Gee, 2008).

The escape of Fleance has symbolic significance in the play, equally in terms of affecting Macbeth's emotional state, and in its demonstration of both the witches' equivocation and their predictive powers, even though we barely see Banquo's son represented directly in the text. His survival is important, and Leah wanted to preserve that in order to protect the original narrative of the play. However, by taking his survival, rather than its effects as the focus, Leah grants interiority to a character of much less significance – one of the murders. From the analytical standpoint of a teacher of English, this representational and interactive decision-making process suggests a sophisticated engagement with narrative construction, but also a critical engagement with the perceived deficits in Shakespeare's original text, Derridean supplementation in the terms that underpin my theoretical work. By exploring minor details, whilst trying not to disturb the events of the original narrative, Leah is consolidating her knowledge of the text whilst interrogating the 'whys' and 'what ifs' of Shakespeare's decisions.

In an interview where she was asked to describe her partial game, she explained:

The two murders are supposed to go and kill Banquo. And while the two murderers were killing Banquo, one of the murderers ... us [gestures to self to indicate she is talking about the player/avatar] we're supposed to chase Fleance while he randomly... And there is going to be this big elaborate chasing of the 'us' and Fleance and the one of... And then you reach a point where we realize that we feel guilty for Fleance because of the guilt of the whole situation and the avatar's given a choice of whether to kill Fleance or to let him live.

And... Depending on which one you chose, at the end of the day Fleance still escapes. But if the if the Avatar was to pick to let him go, the... 'us' the Avatar had to go back to the murderers and lie to them, telling them that he escapes out of our reach and really we let him go by ourselves.

In her description of her thought process, we can observe that she is interested in the ideas of guilt and morality, and she wants to use her game to generate an awareness of morality in the players interacting with her game-as-communicative-act: whether they let Fleance go or if he escapes the outcome is the same, so the ‘wrong’ choice is futile. She also seems to want to challenge her player to reflect on their choices, and to further challenge their morality by forcing them to lie if they have made the morally right decision, encouraging their emotional immersion in the game.

Furthermore, the insertion of character depth for one of the murderers is particularly interesting as by exploiting a deficit or lack in the text, it suggests that Leah has made space for her own creativity, indicating an engagement with the text and task, as she is reassembling details at her own meta-level of authorship (‘...desire to create with and expand on the source text’). This returns us O’Neill and Rogers ideas about the transformation of text, where they note that students’ responses to tasks can linked to their active involvement in a text (O’Neill and Rogers, 1994). In other words, by her engagement - for O’Neill and Rogers the ‘prying open’ of a text - Leah becomes a producer of meaning herself, taking on the role of ‘creator,’ even though she is working with a text that has already been created and established. This sense of ownership is a highly desirable state in a classroom, and has positive implications both for Leah’s connection with written texts, and also with her future success in English, which despite the disruption to her examinations, she hoped to pursue as an A Level.

As well as ‘prying open’ a text, we can additionally frame Leah’s communicative act of interaction as a play of traces. We find trace as pre-Discourse, with ideas about ‘correctness’ broken lose from their original contexts, allowing for play within an established system and for meaning to be made independently of the established Discourses of school and game play. This ‘play’ is also a play of traces, as we find a layering of the ghosts of Leah’s self, of her proposed audience, of Shakespeare’s ‘intended’ narrative, of the potential of any narrative to be

remediated, and all of the contexts that make up home, school, and third space forming a production that is both new and not new at all, in defiance of constructed cultural dualisms. If the metafunction that describes this process is ‘interaction,’ then in deconstructive terms, the interaction is always open to interpretation through the mirroring of traces in creator and audience. However, if representation and interaction as metafunctions are fused in game making, then we also see a collapsing of the modes that communicate with the player before they get to interact with the design of the game, and so designer and player are both held in a relationship of traces with an artefact that is in process of being both written and rewritten.

If we additionally consider in what way her experience was immersive, we find that her immersion was not necessarily in the play text as it was represented on the page. Instead, her immersive experience on the study day was in the use of the MissionMaker software, which has pedagogical implications for helping students in fostering a sense of ownership over challenging literary texts, including Shakespeare’s plays. As has been similarly noted in the use of drama (Coles and Bryer, 2018) and in other MissionMaker projects (Burn and Durran, 2013; De Paula et al., 2018), the active assumption of a role within the text encourages familiarity with it, and students experience immersion via play. In the retheorised concept of engagement, where a student develops a relationship with a text, is motivated to understand its construction, and becomes involved with it enough to want to reauthor elements of it so that they themselves are included within the textual space, we can see the process Leah has gone through, even with a text as oblique to life as *Macbeth*. Her relationship with the text is further demonstrated through her response to the follow-on creative writing tasks the class were set, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

When we examine how Leah herself talks about her creative work, we can observe an interesting use of pronouns, ‘us’ and ‘we,’ – what Burn terms the pronominal shift (Burn, 2003) - which indicates that she elides herself with the player/avatar in a manner suggestive of an immersed state, where she exists as trace in the text, as the text exists as trace in her. It would be easy here, however, to fall back into the casual usage of ‘immersion’ and, similarly, ‘engagement,’ that this thesis seeks to move away from. If we talk about immersion as defined by this study – as a person’s experience of responding to a text containing an element of emotional connection, safety, or familiarity that breeds a comfort allowing a person to lose themselves in the text, a shifted attention whereby the text surrounds a person – then we have to re-examine Leah’s relationship to the original text of *Macbeth*. What has she found of herself in this process? How has she felt safe enough to lose herself in the text? And how has her experience allowed for her sense of presence to shift?

It may be, as I have argued above that, in fact, the immersion Leah demonstrates is generated by an initial experience of engagement, whose characterised feeling of ownership then permitted Leah to stake her claim on *Macbeth*. Having the opportunity to take textual elements and then build a game from them, informed by the third texts brought with her from her lived experience, is what gave Leah the sense of reassurance needed to ‘pry open’ the Shakespeare narrative and reside there for a while. Immersion and engagement, as redefined for this project, must constantly be understood as relational in order to be useful to the classroom teacher. Here, in Leah, we observe her previous experience with games, and the narratives she has experienced in chosen reading and television, which will be discussed in greater depth in the following chapter, led her to develop her knowledge of an academic set text, and assume her own perspective on it.

The linkages between immersion and engagement, as I have made clear in previous chapters, are not ones originated, though they are grown, by this thesis. In her development of the dual conceptualisation of immersion/engagement, McMahan was prefigured by Douglas and Hargadon (2001), who similarly posit an idea of immersion and engagement as linked but different concepts. However, as they state in their specific consideration of games that, ‘The pleasure of immersion in interactives stems from our ability to take guided action and see the outcomes from our choice of one or more scripts within a single schema...’ (Douglas and Hargadon, 2001b) we need to reconfigure their ideas. With Literature, it is slightly different from ‘interactives’, as there *is* a single pathway for a reader to take to a stable outcome, or, in the case of *Macbeth* a single, canonical ‘script.’ Immersion in game playing can be derived from the narrative or ludic elements of the process, but in the case of narrative it comes from the lack or fractures in the text in which a reader can situate themselves. For game design, rather than game playing, the immersion is in the problem solving, planning for the metafunction of interaction, which is a dimension this project must keep returning to. It is necessary here to consider further the difference between immersion and engagement in playing a game, and immersion and engagement as experienced in designing one.

Leah, and other students in both the *Beowulf* and the *Macbeth* cohorts, seems to find the experience of using *MissionMaker* as being like a game in and of itself. There is a puzzle – how to realise the game ideas the students have – to solve, technical difficulties to overcome, and a limit to resources (particularly time). As such, Leah’s experience of designing the game itself appeared to be immersive, but her discussion of the game, and her creation of the story afterwards, is more demonstrative of engagement due to the level of consciousness involved, though she is left able to immerse herself in the original narrative. When she discusses her game, her use of ‘we’ as a pronoun indicates a perceived audience, so we can infer she is

possibly considering the interactive user experience of people playing her game. However, it would also be possible to argue that her experience, and relationship to the game, is entirely self-focused. For students more generally, we could suggest that as readers they can become immersed, but as writers they are more likely to be engaged, unless their creation reaches a stage of comfort so that it becomes a state that cycles back into immersion.

Furthermore, when Douglas and Hargadon go on to describe engagement by arguing, ‘the pleasure of engagement with hypertext fiction comes from users’ access to a wide repertoire of schemas and scripts, our attempts to discover congruencies between the hypertext and an array of often mutually exclusive schemas, and, ultimately, our ability to make sense of the work as a whole.’ (p.160) We are reminded, once again, that *Macbeth*, textually, does not occur in a cultural vacuum, and students cannot help but bring their own textual experiences to bear on it, in the same way that *Macbeth* has exerted its own influence of culture. Within the confines of this particular project, Shakespeare’s play is only one resource, and one schema, that Leah used when building a game. The expansion into the wider resources of popular cultures is what allows Leah’s work to become an act of engagement, rather than simply one of immersion, as she is blending different structures she knows into a new kind of hybrid. If, as Douglas and Hargadon seem to suggest, engagement is hyper- and intertextual: the user of a text is driven, by a love for the text, to find linkages within and beyond it: in other words, their viewpoint is more holistic. For Leah, it is important that her game avatar has the same level of interiority she expects from characters represented in other media. In her writing, this will be what drives the actions – the verbs – she attributes to the character as the narrative progresses, whereas in her game, what she has to work with are her production choices regarding the ‘playable actions’ her avatar can do (Burn, 2021).

In exploring the idea of interiority in games and game making, Burn notes the difference, not only between characters in literature and film versus games, but also within

games themselves with avatars versus NPCs (Burn, 2021). For Leah, the creation of a character that she, then latterly a player, can inhabit in a game-space, leads to a more developed written character later on in her creative process. This is not necessarily surprising, as in exploring the significance of character, Burn points us to Sinfield, who argues that, ‘... character is a major category through which we conceptualize. ... There is no essential woman or man, but there are ideas of women and men and their consciousnesses, and these appear in representations’ (Sinfield, 1992). What this means for Leah, and the other students involved in the project, is that characters who they have conceptualised through their normal classroom study of *Macbeth* are then the natural vehicle through which their games come to be. An avatar-centric model of creation is, I would argue, a natural engagement-focused (in my sense of the term) extension of the immersion of the game-making process, as also seen with the *Beowulf* cohort.

When all of the above is considered – the conditions for immersion and engagement, and the materials with which young people assemble texts – it makes it difficult to speak with any authority of a single set of conditions for engagement and immersion, though the ideas of familiarity and safety as primary conditions do hold true. That engagement follows the pleasures of immersion also remains a realistic conclusion, though the initial entry point for an immersive state still requires more exploration, which we can follow through analysis of the work of two very different students in Leah’s class, and in later chapters. What appears to be beyond negotiation, however, is that students must be able to encounter a text on their own terms in order for it to be meaningful (Vygotsky, 1933).

Aiko

Aiko, another of the Year 10 students, also chose to adapt the narrative of *Macbeth* with an off-text deviation exploring the character's, and the player's, morality. As with Leah, Aiko focused on a minor character, Lady Macduff, in order to challenge her audience to make difficult choices, however she allowed the player the

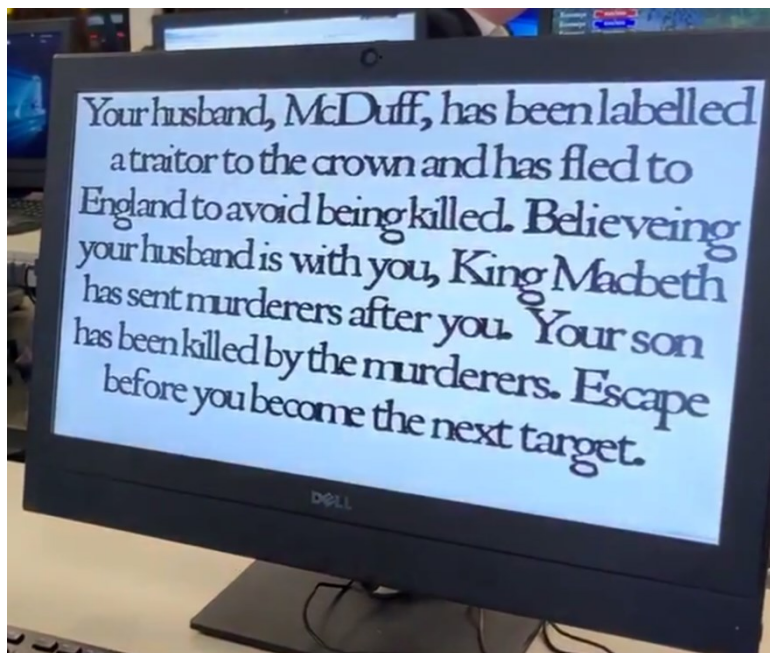


Figure 17: Aiko's' in-game text

opportunity to, potentially, break with the original narrative.

In the original plot of *Macbeth*, first Macduff's children, then his wife, are murdered by representatives from Macbeth. In Aiko's retelling, however, Lady Macduff has the chance to escape, though her children do not. Aiko placed the NPC (non-player character) of a child on the floor of one of the rooms and overlaid a small 'fountain of blood' effect to make this point gruesomely clear. As a game-design strategy, her choices are interesting on two fronts: firstly, because we see young woman developing and repositioning a minor female character as central to her game-narrative (remedying a representational lack), and secondly, because this character's narrative is a morally and emotionally difficult one, which is further visually represented in a bloody and graphic way, suggesting possibly it is either Aiko's intention to make the game more difficult to play, or that her own engagement with popular culture means she is relatively immune to digital violence. All of these points further demonstrate the fusion of the metafunctions of representation and interaction, as well as indicating an overarching play of the trace of Aiko's third texts.

Unlike Leah, Aiko utilised the mode of in-game text, as can be seen in [FIG. 17]. The imperative, 'Escape before you become the next target,' echoes the tone of the original text where a messenger warns Lady Macduff "If you will take a homely man's advice, /Be not found here.". This is indicative that Lady Macduff's survival has become the key objective for this part of the game, but can also be seen as suggesting a desire on the part of the game's author for a female character in a text to break through the original role written for her, and develop a sense of agency, shifting what Aiko's communicative act is doing in terms of representing narrative, action, and gender. Whatever the gender of the player, they are situated as a female 'you,' and in avatar form we live and die with the minor female character, presenting a challenge to the Discourses of femininity haunting the original play.

This game is centred around a female character fighting against the violent male power of the play, which arguably demonstrates that young women are increasingly willing to write representations of themselves into spaces that may traditionally be hostile towards them – both the original male-dominated Shakespearean text *and* the field of videogame design. In making her game about female survival, Aiko grants a character a new life, potentially, which is indicative of a dissatisfaction with the character's original fate. Her game narrative is not quite a moral choice like Leah's, however, but one of survival, making the interaction between text and audience a more tense form of interactive communication. The choice here is potentially a stronger break from the original play, but provides this option against the darker backdrop of the character: if she is to survive then she will need to contend with a second survival, that of the trauma of losing her children to violent deaths. The ease with which Aiko is able to make a game out of these details could be viewed as problematic, however in watching her construct the game-product and interviewing her afterwards, it became clear that she simply wanted to create a game that found a balance between relaying the narrative of *Macbeth* in a way that could be seen as 'educational,' whilst also creating a game that mapped onto her own

experience of playing games, demonstrating deep engagement with the process on the level of narrative and in dialogue with the Discourses of education and correctness we also saw in exploring Leah's work.

During an interview with Aiko and Ugne, another student this chapter discusses, taking place more than twelve months after the original project, after schools had closed for COVID19 and the GCSEs had been cancelled, Aiko still strongly recalled the Macbeth study day, her decisions regarding her game, and her feelings about the scene she was assigned. In the interview, she discussed her choices in more depth,

A: Yeah well trust when I first cause um we were separated into different groups and each group got a different chapter or a different scene that they had to recreate in the game ... and I remember when I first received mine I wasn't too happy with the scene because I didn't know how I would create a game around the death of Lady Macduff and her children ... so I wasn't I wasn't too happy about that ... but then I was thinking about it and my idea for that game was to create kind of like um the games where you have to like run away so for example um like kind of like Temple Run, I guess, but Macbeth style [laughter] no like it running away from the murderers cause um Macbeth send some murderers after Macduff's wife and their children and lady Macbeth [sic] is at home if memory serves me correctly in the place she is at home and she sees her child get murdered... also her children get murdered so she's running away but eventually she does get caught but the part the game you're playing... you're playing as Lady Macduff running away but the ending of the game isn't quite perfect because it was quite difficult to kind of keep her alive coz although she's the main character that you're playing she ends up dying anyway ... so it's a bit hard to create but think I did an okay job

[...]

A: I wanted to recreate the events that go on in the play as much as I could because if she survives that kind of wouldn't really make sense that's not what happens in the play I... tried to follow the storyline as much as I could

Notably, she was unhappy with the scene she was assigned, and remembered being unhappy at this future point. However, her dislike forced her to become more familiar with an unfamiliar section of the play, which would have served her well in an exam situation. She, through her engaged game making, became immersed in the narrative, becoming familiar with the shape of it. The reference to *Temple Run* (Imagni Studios, 2011) is another interesting nuance, as it is

a simple game format – endless running – that can be considered easily immersive, which implies the form of game play that she feels most appropriate for an educational game for fellow students – one with a low level of access.

Later in the same interview, she commented further on her ideal ending for her game as follows,

A: I think it would have been nice if um for the game that I created if at the end because um Lady Macduff gets caught eventually, after that if there was kind of like a cut scene and it cuts to the next chapter in the play ... um Act sorry ... in the play because that way it would be kind of like a smooth gaming experience I guess...

This is interesting both because of the language she uses to talk about games and the play, and because of the need she feels to pull back from the more off-text potential of her game – that Lady Macduff could escape – in order to preserve the original narrative. This choice indicates the overarching power of the Discourses of school and learning, as even the most creative of students are afraid of their learning being perceived as incorrect in their interactive, communicative act of game making.

If we pause here, we can reconsider the different factors influencing Aiko's 'work'. Firstly, she is situated as a student, who, secondly, is studying a GCSE Shakespeare text. The first two influences are therefore one of an assigned identity, and one as a reader of a text with historically weighty context and an equally weighty purpose of study. She is not encountering the narrative of *Macbeth* simply as a reader, but as a student required to perform a certain *kind* of reading, who furthermore is required to then *do* something with her reading. However, in addition to her academic influences, we have Aiko's identity as a young woman outside of school, and also her interest in gaming. In this case study, it is important not to focus on Aiko just as a student, but also to consider the multimedia, multimodal pull of her experience with gaming, as this is the grammatical structure that allows her to articulate *Macbeth's* narrative in digital form. Bringing game making into the classroom as an ephemeral, transient third space

also allows for her to communicate representationally outside of normal school structures, allowing room for her to articulate herself with greater freedom than ‘exam language’ might permit, which then, ironically, could lead her back to assessable writing of a higher quality (RQ3).

As noted in the previous chapter, and previously in this chapter, students can encounter texts by way of a third text, but the inspiration of third space must also be recognised. As Potter and McDougall (Potter & McDougall, 2017) developed their ideas about literacies around a reconceptualization of third space, using the paradigm for exploring points of intersection between multiple influences on literacy, we can then extend this to argue that what Aiko is doing occupies a ‘third’ space between the academic and the personal, which is why it is so interesting as a case, and why studying it is applicable to both education *and* Games Studies research. However, as with the *Beowulf* students before her, we are also seeing the creative influence of her third texts.

With third *spaces*, the ‘first’ space is a physical or ‘personal’ location, the second is an online or ‘professional’ space, but the third is a hybrid space of the two, or a place that is neither one nor the other and therefore liminal. Following this spatial consideration, for ‘third texts,’ and following the same conceptual paradigm, the ‘first text’ is one produced by a student, the second is a text to be studied, and the third is a text accessible to a student that allows them to unlock the second, studied text, which also creates a greater degree of fluency when they have to produce and own ‘first’ texts, with authorial intent and integrity. For Aiko, her location as a gamer, and her enjoyment of games like *Temple Run*, which will be unpacked in more detail shortly, are what unlock a deep immersion in, and engagement with, the narrative of *Macbeth*. Though Shakespeare’s tragedy is a playscript, a text whose purpose is to form a framework for a live performance, the way the English Literature GCSE is assessed requires the play be treated as a written artefact. Through her experience of a third text, a game, Aiko is able to

rediscover the performative aspects of the script as she attempts to map the text onto a kind of performance, whereby the consumer plays a role through the proxy of an avatar. The shifts between modes and media are key to the shift in Aiko's experience of *Macbeth*, as having to 'do' something with it, other than read it, resulted in her approaching the script as stimulus and source material for a creation of her own, and *Temple Run* formed the framework through which she was able to make sense of the task she had been set. This in turn creates a shift for other audiences' interactions with the play, as through playing Aiko's game their communication with the narrative of the text becomes a series of physical actions whereby they navigate the game space to move the story on.

Returning to the interview transcript, where Aiko talks about using a cut scene there is a point of elision between the language of text and the language of game – in itself a cinematic trope increasingly prevalent in contemporary games as graphics have improved – to move onto the next 'chapter,' a signifier used both in novels and game, but then corrects herself to say 'Act.' This is interesting because it suggests that she took the study day as a serious opportunity for her education in *Macbeth* as she maintained a concern for achieving 'rightness' in what she was doing. In the later interview, she is apparently struggling with whether to conceptualise what she is doing in terms of a play text or a played game, in itself a form of engagement as she is working with schema and forms through different modes, though her language use also demonstrates that she is happy to talk in terms of games, as they represent a familiar space for her. It appears here that like the *Beowulf* students, Aiko does not naturally perceive media hierarchically, but forces herself to conceptualise the playscript as possessing higher status in order to fit into the Discourse of 'literature' in which she studies Shakespeare.

Aiko's determination to preserve the 'correct' version of events in *Macbeth* over and above what would have made for a potentially more interesting game is clearly suggestive of

this discursive status of Shakespeare in the English classroom. Despite enjoying games, and consequently game making, Aiko also feels a respect for the text she, at the time, would have had to sit an exam on. She viewed what she was doing as creating a tool that could be used to educate other students, so she was concerned with her mastery over the text and not presenting information that was ‘wrong.’ This motivation can be seen as the reasoning behind her decision to animate the avatar of a child with a fountain of blood to represent Lady Macduff’s child: in creating her game she had a very specific audience in mind – other, maybe disengaged, teenagers, who would be attracted by the use of gore to illustrate a ‘serious’ exam text. She felt that the use of games in education would be a very positive experience for students, as the interactive metafunction of communication would be appealing to the demographic in a way the original script might not be. On the study day itself Aiko queried, in conversation with Professor Burn, if it might be possible for Lady Macduff to escape and still preserve the shape of the *Macbeth* narrative, as the death of the son might be enough motivation for Macduff’s revenge. In the end, she maintained the death of Lady Macduff as a necessary component of an ‘educational’ game – the accurate representation of the source text – but her decisions are a point of reflection for an English teacher, once again, on the shift towards literature increasingly being understood by students through the lens of ‘content’.

For Aiko, her own experience of gaming is a positive one – she says that she plays games ‘a lot’ and that it is something she does ‘to relax’ – and it is a practice that is integrated into different spaces of her life as she plays blockbuster console games, but also more simple games on her phone. It is this second kind of game that she referenced in our interview, and I will return to a more detailed discussion of it here, to progress a conceptualisation of it as a third text.

Temple Run is a game with a simple concept: you are endlessly running away from something, whilst collecting coins so that you can buy ‘power ups.’ It is not quite the slow and calming game play you would expect someone to find ‘relaxing,’ as there is no pause, just a relentless chase. The game play requires a lot of concentration, and can feel tense or stressful if you are unfamiliar with its mechanics, or are trying to beat a high score, so it is interesting that Aiko references this particular franchise when talking about her own *Macbeth* game. It seems, firstly, that she wanted her game to create a sense of tension for her players when they interact with it, as if the murderers chasing the avatar are relentless. Secondly, it appears that she wanted her game to have the same low level of entry as something as commercially popular as *Temple Run*, desiring accessibility in its design. She was not, incidentally, the only student to have taken influence from the franchise; at least one other group described creating a, ‘traditional ‘run and jump’ game,’ in their planning notes, with ‘objects that kill or deduct life’ placed in the path as obstacles. Thirdly, it could also be argued that by mapping her own game onto a threat that is, in effect, inescapable, Aiko is attempting to reconcile what she wanted to do with the game for narrative satisfaction, versus what she felt she had to do with the game to preserve the original story, which, in the terms of this thesis, is very clearly a demonstration of engagement.

By wanting to end the section of the game she was working on with Lady Macduff’s death occurring in a cutscene, it removes the player’s agency and would result in a shock as a character you had tried to preserve is taken from you. By playing as a particular character, even in something as simple as *Temple Run*, you become invested in them, and when Aiko desires the cutscene for ‘smooth gameplay,’ we can infer she means that the player receives the shock of the avatar’s loss without it being their fault, so they are more inclined to play on. Here, her understanding of the grammar of games and their motivational pushes and pulls becomes apparent: though she wishes to preserve the narrative, she is also thinking in design terms about

what engages players in games as final products, and what keeps them coming back for more – jolting the player from their immersion, but then inviting them back into it. This procedural thinking was more apparent in Aiko than in any of her classmates, who were more concerned with narrative than ludic game mechanics. Considering Burn’s ideas around procedural rhetoric, alongside procedural poetics, we can argue that Aiko has intuitively reached for both (Burn, 2021). She plans for the interactive aspects of her game and considers how to engage a player, whilst also educating them. However, her decisions, by virtue of accounting for the representational, also go beyond planning for game structures: she uses her modal choices to generate affect and mobilise the power of the original script.

As with Leah, it is easily possible to argue that Aiko has developed a relationship with the text. She has taken parts of the narrative, and elements of the game design software – the fountain of blood for example – and constructed a creative piece that is uniquely hers. What has ‘immersed’ Aiko in this instance seems to be both the idea of gaming itself, and her perception of her role as a student of literature. This appears to be enough to encourage her engagement with the task of game design. Her political stance on feminism, her focus on the female avatar, and her desire to explore the different aspects of it, her enjoyment of gaming, and her desire to master *Macbeth* as an element of her education in English Literature, hybridise into a site of both learning and creation, with no harm done to her capacity to discuss the text in an examination.

This self-conscious engagement, as an active state, seems to be the ideal goal for teachers desiring creativity for students, and as we can observe from the first two students from the classroom-based case study, some kind of immersive hook is enough to generate engagement with really interesting work-outcomes, *or* engagement in an academically framed process permits a feeding back into immersion. The third student this chapter discusses, Ugne,

builds an immersive relationship with *Macbeth* that leads to the most experimental output in terms of game design. Ugne is a consumer of a wider variety of narratives – literary and otherwise - so she has more scripts or schema to pull from in the (re)making of her *Macbeth* narrative. However, though Ugne does read, her primary influences for this project were films, television, and games, which allowed for her to develop a relationship with her examination text and transform it into a successful game idea, highlighting again how a students' third texts can be any narrative form.

Ugne

In terms of her background, Ugne is doubly interesting in terms of 'immersion' as she is a student classified as 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL), having originally been born in Serbia. Spending the first part of her life in another country meant that she initially learnt English as a foreign language, then developed her fluency of it through the kind of 'MFL' immersion noted in the literature review of this thesis. Her speech is marked by an accent, which she describes as 'kind of American,' and means that she has had discussions about 'where she is really from' for most of her time in school, always retaining a trace of the different aspects of her identity and where she had come from. Her language background has not hampered her success in English, however, as her work ethic saw her excel across the curriculum in school. She has a talent for both the creative writing of 'Language,' and the analysis of 'Literature.'

During the *Macbeth* study day, Ugne was assigned Act 1 Scene 5 for her game, the scene where Lady Macbeth receives news of Macbeth's success in battle, his promotion, but also the prophecies of his future Kingship from the three witches. The scene opens with her reading a letter from Macbeth, and then sees her delivering her famous 'the raven himself is hoarse' soliloquy where she calls on evil spirits to rob her of her femininity in order to allow

her to push her husband to achieve the greatness he has been promised. Ugne's creative choices in representing this scene in game form centre on the potential for the supernatural that Lady Macbeth's words suggest.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, for a lot of the students the design and creative processes of game making took place across a series of different modes. Ugne in particular drew influence from a wide range of sources, from popular cultural texts she enjoys, to her annotated playscript of *Macbeth* [FIG. 18].

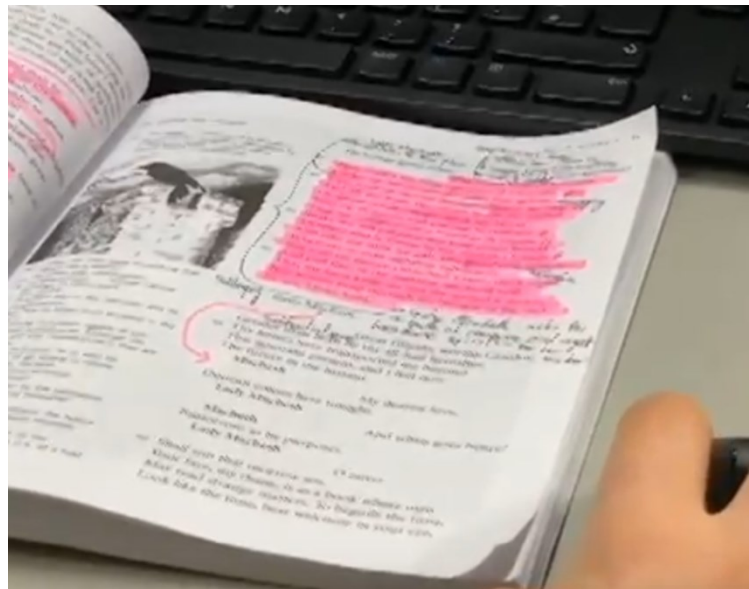
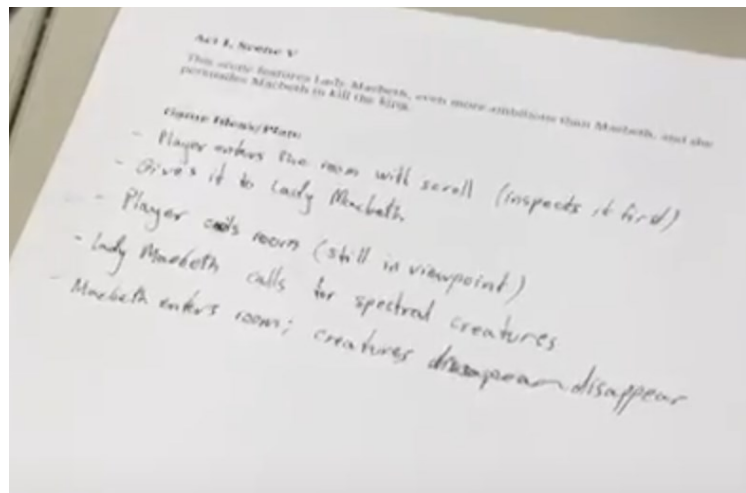


Figure 18 Ugne's playscript

She enjoys the genre of Fantasy more than any other, so her planning moved quickly on to the idea of there being 'spectral creatures,' who disappear when Macbeth enters, drawing from the Discourses of Fantasy and the supernatural, which she wanted to trace into her final product.



In her game Ugne chose to assign the player the role of a servant witnessing the soliloquy, so that we are able to take in its full effect. During the study day, it was her intention that the avatar find a scroll containing the text of Macbeth's letter, and after gaining the letter, the 'aggression' level (the language of MissionMaker's functions) of Lady Macbeth would increase, making her attack the player if they got too close. Here, her design choices for

interactivity show an understanding of the affordances of MissionMaker, a familiarity with how commercial games can work, and a sense of her considering how interaction as a communicative act can broaden and deepen an audiences' understanding of both character and plot.

What is most interesting about Ugne's version of the scene, however, comes from her visual adaptation of the line, "Come to my woman's breasts/ And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,/ Wherever in your sightless substances/ You wait on nature's mischief!" (Shakespeare and Gill, 2009). She was interested in the idea of there being 'murdering ministers,' what they might look like, and how they might manifest, so she decided to have them visually represented within her game. MissionMaker has several options for people or creatures, but Ugne chose to represent these figures as miniature dragons in her design. She had ambitions for the creatures that were technically complex, though she was not able to fully realise them on the day, for example, she wanted the 'spectral creatures' to grow along with Lady Macbeth's growing ambition, and wanted them to be surrounded by mist, in order to give them a greater symbolic presence in her game. Her literacy across modes is evident here, as she desires to use visual and kinetic elements of the game for symbolic value. She is also making representational choices that suggest where she situates the play in terms of genre, utilising her understanding of genre third texts she has encountered before, and she sees a trace of here.

The choice of dragons over anything else was not incidental for Ugne, and reflects a trace of a particular franchise she had a great deal of investment in: *How to Train Your Dragon* (DeBlois and Sanders, 2010). This franchise began with a novel, which became a series of films, which spawned a TV series and video games to great commercial success, and at the time of the *Macbeth* study day, Ugne was involved with all of the different aspects of the franchise, which fed into her in- and out- of school creative writing, fan art, and even into her

creation of 3D models of the dragons from the film. In a move that is similar to the choices Leah made with her game, Ugne found an opening she could exploit in the original text – two words, ‘murdering ministers’ - whilst still maintaining the original narrative direction. Her choice of third text, which we have already seen as an influence on the *Beowulf* group, also implies a similar grounding in her self-identity as being comfortable with situating herself within ‘geek’ Discourses.

By incarnating the ‘murdering ministers’ she is using a familiar Fantasy trope from her third textual landscape to add a layer of complexity to Lady Macbeth, forcing the player of her game to question if Lady Macbeth is *already* mad, or if she has successfully conjured evil spirits who then haunt her and *drive* her mad. This representational choice demands interrogation by her audience, structuring a very academic form of interaction into her work. The play itself explores the intersections of human evil, magic, and religion, so the creative choices Ugne made link quite strongly to content in the play we explored as a class, which means that she, arguably, has not just forced an appearance by dragons because she is interested in them: she has tried to make them relevant so she can create at a point of juncture between a school text and a freely chosen one.

Building on her willingness to form relationships with texts, Ugne is, outside of the classroom, a creative writer in her own right, even though she did a simple write-up of her experience of game-making rather than doing something narrative-based when the class were assigned the follow-up task. It is possible that, as with Aiko, she made this choice because she felt obliged to stick to the plot of *Macbeth* as she did not feel empowered to rework the narrative, again possibly suggesting the subtle damages of a restrictive National Curriculum – the limitations placed on students’ creative capacities and the canonising of a very narrow kind of text. This is not to say that the curriculum has negatively affected her relationship to literature outside of lessons, however, as Ugne used her time, having been freed from GCSE

revision, to work on writing her own fantasy novel. In her writing outside of curriculum constraints, which she finds easily immersive, we can observe her relationship with genre fiction, but also how her game design managed to retain a trace of her interests without straying too far from the original text of *Macbeth*.

Ugne's willingness to work with the complexities of Lady Macbeth's character in game-form does, though, resonate with the creative choices made by both Leah and Aiko. When discussing her game in the later interview, Ugne spoke more about Lady Macbeth as a character in transition,

Interviewer: So, what were you hoping to achieve with the games?

U: I guess I wanted to add those spectral figures to visualise Lady Macbeth's coming towards evil. I remember when she was calling the evil spirits, I remember she's kind of transitioning... she's letting go of her morals, she's was letting go of everything she found merciful and good and I guess when um I was designing the game, I remember making her pick up the letter, read it, then call upon the evil spirits and I remember... I guess I just wanted to encompass how much she has changed in kind of that short time interval. I wanted to show that she went through this enormous change um just to get a chance at becoming royalty... I just wanted to show the contrast in her character at the beginning and the end of that scene.

Interviewer: [...] The other thing ... who is the playable character in your game?

US: Ah.. I was the... I was I think was it a servant? Or someone who bought in the letter ... and then I was hiding behind ... behind the door. Yeah... and the player's job was to get the letter to Lady Macbeth, but then upon her opening it I think the character just stood behind the door observing what was going on.

Considering the existing semiotic resources made available by the play, Ugne notes Lady Macbeth's sudden desire to become royalty, whilst also including the figure of the servant in a nod to her existing nobility. The loss of 'everything [Lady Macbeth] found merciful and good,' is what Ugne isolates as the character's key change, and her decision to symbolise that being aided by 'evil spirits' nudges the game into the realm of the fantastic rather than being a moral tale about human frailty. In a way, this creative choice aligns Lady Macbeth's character arc with that of Macbeth himself, as within the logic of Ugne's game they are *both* directly

influenced by figures of evil, meaning they are weak rather than evil in and of themselves – a much more hopefully reading of humanity than a more cynical audience to *Macbeth* might come to. She blends her ideas about the play with her interest in the Fantasy genre, demonstrating engagement in her assemblages of game ideas, but also was very clear about how she wanted to represent her version of morality to her audience.

Later on, she, like Aiko in the same interview, goes on to discuss what she would like to develop her game to include, and mentions some of the technical difficulties she experienced with the software,

US: Um I would also have liked to make the game a bit longer... initiate that demon calling bit ... and then sort of liked to have the scene end with a transition to the next scene... so was it Ross that walked in and told Lady Macbeth that Macbeth had arrived ... And I think that if it wasn't so buggy, and I didn't have the misfortune of my scene going bonkers right at the end... I would have like right at the end of transition into the next scene ... it wasn't actually Ross... it was someone else?

The idea of the cutscene arose again, as Ugne, like Aiko, had played enough games to view it as an almost expected element of videogames – to have cinematic visuals fill in moments of narrative that would (perhaps) lose their drama if they were played or inhabited, rather than watched. She is thinking about how to immerse an audience in a game, whilst overcoming the rupture to her own immersion caused by the limits of the technology. One could reasonably question, though, if the reference to cutscenes is a utilisation of the grammar of computer games, if it represents moments of narrative the students were not sure how to render as game, or if it reflects their perceived limitations with the software and represents a design choice that functions as an easy way out for game-problem solving. It is notable that for both Aiko and Ugne that they wanted a cutscene as a transition between scenes in the play, almost as a proxy for the scene change you would experience if the play were to be performed on a stage, negotiating the relative affordances of stage and game. For someone recreating a

similar style of workshop in the future, it would be interesting if they posed a brief for students to show a scene transition without a cutscene, in order to see what kind of problem-solving might transpire.

Furthermore, at the end of this section of the interview, we see Ugne question herself on the accuracy of her recall of the original text. Again, like Aiko, she asks me – presumably as her teacher, rather than as the interviewer – if she has got information about a character in the play right, even though by the time of interview she knows she will not be formally examined on the text so really it is of little consequence to her. From this interaction, it is possible to infer something of both the status of English Literature as a taught subject, and also more generally of how the Discourses of the fourth Key Stage of the National Curriculum and its exams shapes students' relationship with content: if the literature on the course is only ever to be viewed in relationship to examinations, then immersion in it, and engagement with it, will most likely remain hampered by notions of 'correctness,' which will manifest further in how students are able to transform and use the texts for themselves.

The Class as a Whole

In addition to the specific girls discussed above, it was interesting to observe the whole class, and how some students were committed to overcoming the technical difficulties they faced, whereas some found software issues too much of a barrier to their engagement with the game design task. The variance in outcome indicates that technical issues are not the be all and end all (as it were) of success, and therefore wider external factors need to be considered – students' relationships with video games and their unique grammar, for example, their level of comfort with using PCs, and their perception of what a classroom experience should look like and be – which reiterates that, though there is evident value in game design for helping students to build a relationship with 'difficult' texts, it is not a universally successful strategy. In order

for engagement in all of the later tasks, however, an ability to become immersed in the use of the game-making software seemed to be the key factor.

Some of the highest prior attaining ‘top set’ girls were the ones who struggled during the *Macbeth* study day the most. As we can see in one student’s reflective writing, she was unhappy with her experience of the day,

My work was very limited because of the type of program I was working with. In my opinion, the program was very difficult and complicated [...] Eventually we gave up. When I watched other people’s games at the end of the lesson, It made me realise that I can’t be good at everything and everything won’t always be made for me. Hopefully, the game will be made easier for children like me in the future.

Here we can see a student who is used to excelling academically feeling as if she is unable to reconcile her identity as a student with her struggle with the technology. She ends on a note that suggests she blames the technology for her negative experience during the study day, so we can infer that she had none of the potential external factors, such as a prior interest in gaming, that could have helped her persevere with the game design task. There also appears to be a lack of third text bridge, which is contextually unsurprising, as the student in question did not read for pleasure – she positioned herself as someone with a ‘scientific’ mind, and preferred analytic to creative work. She also viewed gaming as a pastime that was uninteresting, which again meant she lacked a third text reference point, reminding us that videogame design is not a singular panacea for the lacks in the NC.

Towards the end of the later interview conducted with Aiko and Ugne, they themselves turned to reflecting on the idea of games in education. For Aiko, she felt that making or playing games about *Macbeth* brought an element of ‘fun’ to studying the text, and therefore encouraged students to engage more, whilst Ugne, thought it was a useful *aide-memoire* through the visualisation of key scenes and quotations, as we can see in their discussion here,

Aiko: It would add, like, more storyline so people understand ... because the point of the game ... is to be educational and it's to help people when they want to study Macbeth or get their best studying Macbeth cuz gaming is what people enjoy right so by

incorporating something fun into English literature it makes it more interesting and I think it's easier to remember the ... what goes on in the play/

Ugne: Yeah, it's more visual. You don't really ... I think it's one of those things ... that remembering the game is more easy... You essentially remember the whole storyline and then it's more easy to remember quotes, if you find a way to visualise everything... not necessarily ... like films can do the same thing as well, but if you're actually playing as the characters and they're going to be a lot easier um put yourself in that ... in that person's shoes. You know it's a lot easier to understand the story...

Towards the end of the dialogue, Ugne talks about how games put you in the 'person's' [avatar's] shoes, and suggests that this embodiment is even more successful than films (a perennial favourite revision tool for exhausted GCSE students) for helping students to remember key information. Here we have, unprompted, a student making a direct link between English and the kind of skills developed in Drama, via game play, and speaking of her experience in how the overlap helped her memory. The result-in-practice is evident throughout the interview between Aiko and Ugne, as they recalled details from their games and the play more widely, even though more than a year had passed, and they had already been out of school for several months in the knowledge that their exams were cancelled. They intuitively understood the power of transforming texts from words on a page into other modes, and they found the opportunity of the play script to game transformation a helpful and positive experience. The embodied experience of play acts as a particular kind of immersion, whilst sharing the games with their peers, and having a clear sense of a perceived audience also added to their engagement with the day. The students who struggled with the technology *and* had little experience of gaming, meanwhile, provide a sub-commentary on the power of making sure students are literate across media, and are empowered to develop technical skills applicable to the world they will leave school into.

Neither this particular class, nor the *Beowulf* group, are alone in their generally positive experiences with MissionMaker, however. We can see similar results in the work of Burn and

Durrán, also applying the software to *Macbeth*, and De Paula et al working with the software and *Beowulf* (Burn and Durrán, 2013; De Paula et al., 2018). With game design and game playing sitting neatly in between English and Drama, projects such as these have the opportunity to add another series of modes to what would always already be a multimodal classroom. Providing students with more opportunities to bring their own narrative experiences to examination texts consistently, it seems, provides them with the safety and the familiarity they require to become immersed in challenging ‘content,’ leading them to then feel as though they have the agency to take an engaged role in breaking the texts apart for the purpose of analysis or creation. This argument is not radically different from what theorists as diverse as O’Neill and Rogers, Freire, Barrs, Coles, and Bryer have long been reasoning (O’Neill and Rogers, 1994; Freire, 1996; Barrs, 1987; Coles, 2013b; Coles and Bryer, 2018; Coles et al., 2023), but the nuance here is how the enjoyment of students, and the acknowledgement of their third texts as valid, can have positive outcomes in terms of their GCSE examinations, which teachers face, no matter what their opinions of the Nation Curriculum, as the unavoidable cumulation of leading students through their five years of secondary school.

The levels of immersion witnessed during the game making day included students becoming immersed in their targeted study of their section of the text, becoming lost in the other planning and design work, and immersion in the use of the game making software. There was also an awareness amongst some of the cases noted above that the games should serve the needs of a target audience, helping them to become immersed in their own play. Meanwhile, though engagement will be more naturally seen in the writing tasks discussed in the next chapter, we do see instances of these students demonstrating the conditions for engagement I argue for in this thesis. We observe this where the students are using their third text reference points, *Temple Run* for example, as a framework for understanding how the games should be designed, but we can also find it where students expand on a lack in the *Macbeth* narrative and

wrap a trace of themselves within the original form. Where engagement has been noted in the above analysis of cases, we also see further evidence for how engagement can feed into immersion, and vice versa. Of course, this level of involvement was not true for all students, and we can also learn much from the ‘negative cases’ the study day revealed.

Failure to engage? – An exploration of the study’s limitations

As has already been mentioned, some students did not engage with the *Macbeth* study day, and there are many possible reasons for this. Again, as previously mentioned, for the use of MissionMaker specifically issues with both the school computers and the software itself presented a significant barrier for students not already motivated by a relationship with gaming. Students with a talent for written analytical work, but limited computer skills were also disheartened by the gap between their textual and technical knowledge. This resulted in these students dismissing the task as a waste of their time, despite them being students with high prior achievement, which firstly demonstrates that there is not always a clear link between academic ability and behaviour, and secondly suggests that workshops such as the *Macbeth* day need to be differentiated in an even more structured way to begin with, to ensure any barriers to engagement are not technological. Furthermore, I have argued that immersion requires a sense of safety or comfort. If a student is not comfortable in computer use, it is not then surprising that they fail to achieve a state of immersion using them – it is easy to imagine that in a related drama task, students uncomfortable performing would have similar issues with becoming immersed in the process.

In the account below, we have a detailed write up from a student, Tobi, who had a very clear vision of what she wanted to achieve, but who became very caught up in aesthetic details when the software did not behave as she anticipated,

My group... did act 2 scene 2 – the murder scene of Duncan. Adding the bed was not a problem, but getting it to the right size and position was. Sometimes the bed

will be slanted or just disappear into the floor – this was very frustrating, but in the end we managed to get rid of that big bed and get a more ‘humbling’ bed for Duncan.

Also, another [issue] that we faced was adding King Duncan onto his Kingly bed – we had to try every angle to get him onto the bed but when we finally got him onto the bed his character started to glide off the bed and landed on the floor – so what we decided to do was get a more ‘humble’ floor bed which isn’t high at all and put him onto it.

In the end, after a lot of help and guidance from Ms Croasdale we managed to develop a simple programme. Our character (Macbeth) is able to fight the soldiers that are guarding King Duncan’s door and those soldiers are programmed to fight back. When the soldiers are defeated King Duncan’s door open[s] automatically, then us (as Macbeth) enter the room and beat King Duncan to death. It is a little bit off the script because Macbeth uses a dagger, but time was drawing near.

Tobi’s writing here is quite formal – as a student with high academic aspirations, she was very concerned with getting things ‘right’ – but her verbal expressions of frustration were much more strongly worded. Her focus on getting small details exactly how she wanted them meant that she became rushed and flustered by the end of the *Macbeth* day as she felt that she had not done ‘enough work,’ and that what she had done was not good enough – a self-perceived lack in terms of her positioning in the Discourses of ‘education’ and ‘exams.’

When we look at the responses of students like Tobi, we can see that for some students, some of the potential reasons for lack of engagement with game making may be more nuanced than simply struggling with technology. Students have their own ideas around what they want from their school experience, and what they expect the classrooms for specific subjects to look like. For some students, English lessons including computers, or Drama activities, are less serious than text-based study, and are therefore not treated with the same focus. They have their own clear conditions for immersion in a text and engagement with a task, bred from their time at school training them in what to expect from different subjects – a further consequence of the structuring of the English National Curriculum. The power of adult-level Discourses around education (from teachers, parents, and policy) clearly filters down into student perceptions of learning, in ways that are troubling to see as an educator, and ultimately diminish a child’s experience of learning.

Furthermore, the normalisation of subject-specific classroom spaces, with no cross-curricular overlap is quite a common occurrence across English schools, reflective of the specialisation required for GCSE examinations leading to the early separation of subjects into exam pathways. The experiences of working in a ‘normal’ classroom lesson, an extra-curricular club, and teaching online are, from my own perspective as a teacher, radically different. During the *Macbeth* day, I attempted to get the students to reflect on their experience and consider their differences in perception between their experience of the *Macbeth* script and their projected games, to try and get them to think beyond the boundaries of the English classroom and subject. Four students had the following exchange when I asked what was the difference between a script and a game,

Student 1: [Games are] //Interactive//

Student 2: //You get to choose what happens//

Student 1: [In scripts] People are limited to what they can do, but in a game you can do anything...

Student 3: What happens if you give the player too much choice?

Student 4: The whole story would change.

The girls perceived scripts and games as very different, even if their perception of what games are is not necessarily completely accurate. There was a clear division in their thinking between a script as a discrete, fixed artefact - something that you can, perhaps, ‘master’ as exam content, indicative of how plays are taught as page-based media rather than live performance – and games as something that seem more free. In the context of the *Macbeth* day, however, there is a hint that some of the students were thinking in a manner suggestive of engagement, as they questioned the freedom of the player, which we can infer they see as a problem as total freedom would destroy the narrative of the original play, which they collectively wanted to preserve so that the *Macbeth* games would remain ‘educational.’

In contrast with the (occasionally anarchic) approaches of the *Beowulf* extra-curricular group, the students involved in the *Macbeth* day appeared to be very much constrained by their relationship to the play as an exam text. For some students, the pressure of being ‘good

students,' working towards exams, proved too much for them to allow themselves the opportunity to be exploratory with their games, to become immersed in the making, or to engage and draw in the cultural resources most interesting to them to pull apart and remake their scenes. In this way the limitations of the English NC can be seen as disempowering to students, preventing them from reaching their creative potential.

Despite this, the majority of the students displayed an immersed working practice, or moved beyond and engaged in finding inventive ways to bring their scenes to life as games. The contrast between the *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* case studies, however, does imply that context and framing are highly important for achieving immersion and engagement in the classroom. It also suggests that third spaces are not automatically 'productive.'

8. Analysis and Discussion: Playing *Macbeth* and then writing about it

In the previous chapter, students' games, and the thoughts students had about games and the game-making process, were discussed. However, the game-making formed only half of the project. As previously noted, the design of this study had to account for the academic 'benefit' of the project for GCSE students. This benefit, it was argued, would manifest in students developing a deeper understanding of *Macbeth* through their close reading of the text to set up their game designs, which we have demonstrated did occur. Furthermore, the students then writing in response to their experience was designed to further encourage students to consider their literature content, as well as develop their creative writing skills, with an attention towards their GCSE Language paper, and its requirement for students to write in response to set stimuli.

In RQ2 and RQ3 of this project, I ask, '*What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*' and '*How can productive connections – academic third spaces*

- *be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?* Over the previous three chapters, responses to these questions have begun to form.

I proposed that immersion, *'refers to an active relationship between person and text, whereby the person and the text are held together by a trace of one another; immersion requires some form of mediation; immersion involves a structure that is beyond the control of the person, but that they can exist safely with,'* and suggested that the conditions for this required a, *'sense of safety or comfort in the space of,'* that the target is, *'able to find themselves in some way reflected in the text'*, that there is, *'space for play of some manner of structure,'* that the subject feels, *'a shifted sense of presence,'* and that the state creates, *'a building of ownership and confidence that can lead beyond the narrative to engagement as a form of play within and around the text'*. What has overwhelmingly appeared to be the case is that a student's third texts are fundamental in supporting this process, over and above the pedagogy they are exposed to. In this final chapter exploring the *Macbeth* group's creative writing, I will be examining the extent to which the dominance of the third text remains consistent.

With engagement, I argued it, *'refers to a metacognitive state where a person takes elements of a pre-existing narrative and repurposes them; where a person expands on or disrupts the boundaries of a text; where the creator takes control.'* Suggesting the conditions for this state includes the subject feeling a, *'sense of ownership or control,'* a, *'desire to create and expand,'* and a, *'sense of confidence that can lead to the comfort and safety required for the student to be immersed in the narrative,'* closing the cyclical relationship between this and immersion. What I failed to account for in the original definition is the importance social relationships can have in the encouragement of engagement, and in this chapter, I will be considering if this is always the case, or if we can see evidence for more individualistic forms of engagement.

As noted in the previous chapters, emerging evidence has been seen for the ways students' third texts can facilitate the opening of third spaces where creative and assessable work can overlap. Furthermore, examples of different immersions – in texts, in making, in playing – and different forms of engagement – in constructing new texts, in the development of new socio-linguistic spaces, and in investment in project-involvement – have been documented as the two disparate groups of students have encountered the processes of videogame making. Following this, the results of the students writing in response to the game-making are explored below and, I would suggest, demonstrate students thinking more deeply about their taught Shakespeare, as a result of making games about it.

Leah

In the previous chapter, Leah's game making decisions were explored. Her relationship with the text, however, is further demonstrated through her response to the follow-on creative writing tasks the class were set. She took this process very seriously, and returned a piece with a significant amount of interesting detail.

After the study day was completed, when the class were set the homework of writing about their experiences in some way, they were given a series of options: to write a recast of the game as narrative, to produce an evaluative text describing the successes and failures of the day, or to create a walkthrough guide for a projected full game. This allowed the students a free choice between narrative or transactional writing. The freedom of choice allowed for a further exploration of the students' perception of the study day, and had the potential to offer insight into the ways in which they 'engaged' (or disengaged) with the task. In terms of consistency of data, a project taking a similar pedagogical approach to this one might be better placed to offer less choice of writing task, so that more comparable writing is captured.

For her write-up of her game Leah chose to recast the game as a story opening, told from the perspective of the third murderer – the avatar in her moral game. Though her writing is brief, the fragment is very telling of both her immersion in, and engagement with, the text. It begins with her paraphrasing of Macbeth's instructions regarding the murder of Banquo, though Leah intersperses references to the original text with an insight into the thoughts and feelings of her protagonist,

"You are sent on a mission to assassinate Banquo and his son, Fleance. You have various weapons at your disposal. You have until dusk and are to report back to King Macbeth." – Instructions I was given hours ago, yet the cold betrayal behind these very words suffocate me.

In my line of work, this should be routine, and it is, yet the fact that such a youth has to go pains me dearly. Suddenly aware of my surroundings, I push by the last branch of wood and step into the clearing.

As soon as I scan the perimeter, I catch sight of my two other partners to assist me. I need not know their names, that's not relevant now. I am only here to get my job done.

"We better hurry up with this job if we want to be able to complete the task at hand," I utter ignoring the conversation I had interrupted as I approach them. Confusion evident on one of their faces, one of them questioned, "Who sent you?" He says scanning me, trying to decipher why a young lady as myself would have any business with such.

As she attempts to establish her central character, Leah also makes the decision to make it explicitly clear that the character is a woman, and one who, in opposition to passive female stereotypes, is directly confrontational towards the male characters, a powerful choice in the metafunction of representation, which seeks to address a lack.

The sematic field of confrontation or military service is also disseminated throughout her writing. 'mission to assassinate,' 'scan the perimeter,' 'scanning me,' 'decipher,' all indicate that Leah's writing is shifting towards genre fiction in its design, hinting there might be a 'third text' that she is using to make sense of all of the textual resources at her disposal. These linguistic choices could indicate that Leah is framing *Macbeth* as a war story, or possibly something that falls between dystopia and Fantasy. The presence of violence echoes the writing of Raphael, Elizabeth, and Ryan in the *Beowulf* project, which could be indicative of the

cultural texts students in this age range are commonly accessing, either through manga/anime, or through streaming services like Netflix.

For Leah, one can also look specifically at her wider textual influences. She reads a lot of 'Young Adult' (YA) fiction that deals in the lives of teenage girls, for example she mentioned the *Divergent* series of novels by Veronica Roth as a particular favourite. These texts generally share the characteristic of an awkward, teenaged girl, who is coming of age, and whose coming to power provides the backbone of the novel, as a contemporary updating of the familiar Bildungsroman form. If we take a generic view of this novelistic form, the prose is commonly written in the first person, and involves a young woman who does not view herself as conventionally beautiful, but grows in power, eventually securing a better position in life and/or the love of a previous unobtainable partner (Roth, 2012). The kind of descriptive and self-depreciating detail often found in these novels can be seen echoed in Leah's description of her protagonist, as is the first-person voice. Her protagonist is a character who explicitly defines herself in the text, so there is no ambiguity as to who she is and what kinds of schema she is likely to inhabit, immersing us in her variation on Shakespeare's rendering of Scotland.

Reading on, we discover the third murderer of Leah's story is not only a woman, but a black woman: her ethnicity and appearance broadly matching Leah's own. We are aware of this specific detail because Leah makes a point of explicitly stating it in her narrative:

5Ft 9", curly brown bush heaped into a high ponytail by my cocoa-toned skin: I don't fit the standard norm of beauty enforced by society; neither do I squeeze into the expectations of women, of society.

Women of my age are supposed to be married off to some rich bloke: in a manor scrubbing floors or preparing the meal by the house: practically only seen as baby-making machines. Not me. Never me.

Outcasted by society due to my appearance, I have been forced to go into the streets. Stealing and selling, just to get by my pure hatred for the world, the only thing driving me on, and with that same hatred brought me to this very moment.

This fragment poses some interesting thoughts regarding immersion, as we are able to observe a young person immersing herself in a text in the sense that she is finding room for

someone of her gender and ethnicity where previously there was none, *Macbeth* being set in Medieval Scotland. We can argue that this firmly sets Leah's experience as immersed both through McMahan's more casual notion of, 'caught up in the world' of the text (McMahan, 2003b), and in immersion of the kind theorised by this thesis. We also retain a sense of Derrida's work, as it was used to underpin the development of the theoretical framework for this project. There is a lack in the 'complete' text, inviting Leah's supplemental contribution to it, which she exploits to great effect. The metafunctional representation here communicates a desire to not only appeal to a wider audience, but also the desire to be spoken to by a text, against a curriculum that focuses predominantly on white writers.

Through her communicative acts, a student has found that key sense of safety in the text, through rigorous exam-focus study leading to narrative familiarity and immersion. However, beyond the story and language of Shakespeare's play there are also the wider human themes covered in *Macbeth* – morality, guilt, ambition – that are arguably recognisable for anyone of any background encountering the text. By being granted license to reengineer a part of *Macbeth*, Leah found a point of intersection between narrative and theme that she was able to take ownership over, organising her ideas, leading into her game and her story opening.

Leah's writing style – in the first person - suggests a more literal immersion, too. The reader also takes on the 'I' of the narrative, Burn's 'pronominal shift' once more (Burn, 2003), so we are doubly situated within the story, and within the perspective of the writer, who in this case is mirrored in the space she has found for herself within *Macbeth*. Leah also slipped into discussing the 'I' when talking about her game, so we can see a mirroring of her vision for what she desired the game to be. The visible similarities between the character and Leah are clear, though the height of the character is significantly greater than that of the author, maybe in recognition of possible terms she would have to negotiate within a male- and white-oriented space. She has taken steps towards problem solving withing the logic of the original text, again

demonstrating shared ownership of the narrative space. Thus, the creative outcomes are very clearly ‘successful’ from a teacher’s perspective, as through the alternative strategy for exploring *Macbeth*, a student has found a way of making the text relevant to herself in a way it otherwise would not have been. Furthermore, we see Leah creatively preserve the boundaries of the original text – at no point does she explicitly contravene Shakespeare’s writerly choices – yet her work is surprising and original, and brings a classic text into a space more relevant for girls in her school’s context.

Leah’s story concludes with her protagonist evaluating the other murderers,

“Macbeth.” The name itself bringing bile to my tongue but I restrict myself from recoiling. I see him going to question me further, but his friend stops him. “She needs not our mistrust, since she was given the same instructions as us.” The second one says. I survey him. He is a well-built man, 6FT at least; looks far from rugged, if anything gentle and smooth. Maybe part of his weapon of innocence.

The other murder quite the opposite; with a tough appearance, dirty demeanour, and scrawny build; his looks are clearly not his strongest. But yet again this could be part of his weapon. “Then stay with us. We need more than one person clearly and we must all report to Macbeth anyway.” Says the short scrawny one. Finally coming to an agreement we silently nod to one another.

A silence settles over us.

The character meets the male characters on equal ground, retaining her agency and functioning from a place of power within Leah’s text. There is also a strong focus on the visual appearance of the characters, as we saw with Ryan and Elizabeth’s writing from the *Beowulf* project, which could suggest that a lot of Leah’s influences are visual, or that her experience with MissionMaker and game making has encouraged her to think about this narrative in a different way to how she might otherwise have viewed the text of *Macbeth*.

I argue that immersion in a text requires a sense of safety – and Leah feels safe both with the narrative of *Macbeth* and the idea of playing games – but what we see in her work here is another layer of consideration – the kind of safety that comes from being able to locate oneself within the text at the level of a relatable character – the relationship suggested by the

Derridean trace, that is, a trace of herself unconsciously recognised within the text which is then built around consciously (Derrida, 2001b). Leah is outside of the text – it was written long before her birth, by a white, male writer, for a cast of men – but she, in the deeper analysis of the text afforded by exploiting details of it for game design is able to conversely also find herself within it through visualising and animating words from the play script. The script contains a trace of the performance, as the performance retains the imprint of the text, but the ‘original’ (a term used very loosely in regard to Shakespeare’s adaptation of real history) does not contain the entirety of the world of the play. It cannot, as words are not images, movements, or sounds: they are marks on a page that require intervention to bring them to life. There is, therefore, in game design, always already a space for students to create and interpret the text in a way that is relevant and immersive to them. The interdependence of page and stage mean that in the *différance* between the two there is always a delay or a lack to be exploited (Derrida, 1973).

However, as Derrida explores across his work, not just in his introduction of *différance*, delay and lack are central to his project to unpick the dualisms that underpin Western Metaphysics. Dualisms such as page/stage, or immersion/engagement for that matter, are always already falsely understood as separate entities, and so their mutual existence is implied in their other half. When students encounter a text, within it is a trace of an alternative form it could become, and by presenting students the opportunity to encounter that trace in an environment where their creative exploration is accounted for and encouraged, teachers can foster a state of creative immersion that can develop into full, active engagement. Across the *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* projects there were observable instances of the students exploiting the gaps in the text, and of them finding space for themselves and their interests inside the historic narratives. Furthermore, as Shakespeare’s plays are assemblages of narrative, real history, the playwright’s personal context, and the stereotypes of human character, in that network of traces

students like Leah should be able to find an element recognisable to themselves, even if that means following the character-based route of unlocking the text (Coles, 2013a). The multiplicity of texts means they can never be fixed, there is room for a supplementary exploration, structural reformation, or the exploitation of minor detail that becomes fully present to itself (Derrida, 1997b; Newton, 1997).

Beyond immersion, an argument could also be made for Leah's creative writing demonstrating the trajectory from immersion into engagement, and vice versa, as her recasting of details from the original text is indicative of a wider awareness of text-as-construct, as well as an ownership of original textual details in her expansion of the role of the last murderer. The decisions she made between game and text design involve transformative action on her part, but there is also resonance between the two different acts of creation, demonstrating a line of through-thought, hinting at her broader engagement with the project. In part, we can observe her transition through the pronominal shift suggested by Burn and noted elsewhere in the previous chapter (Burn, 2003).

When we revisit the conditions for immersion, as established for this thesis, we recall that it requires: a sense of safety in the space of the text, that the student is able to find themselves reflected in the text, that there is the space for play of some manner of structure, most commonly narrative, that there is the experience of a shifted sense of presence, and that there is the building of ownership and confidence that can lead beyond the narrative to engagement. For engagement we recall the metacognitive state where a person takes elements of a pre-existing text and repurposes them, and where a person expands on or disrupts the boundaries of a text. This state is permitted by: a sense of ownership or control over the resources of the text, a desire to create with and expand on the source text, and a sense of confidence that can lead to the comfort and safety required for the student to be (re)immersed in the text. There is, therefore, an argument to be made, in the case of Leah, that it is her

engagement in the game-making process – the active planning, repurposing, and construction - that then fed back into her immersion in *Macbeth*, with the relative lack of space for her in the original script. However, as noted above, there is still room in Shakespeare for young people to find themselves reflected or lacks that offer sites for creative exploitation.

We can, in reference to immersion and Leah's experience, note the ways in which her third texts allow for the comfort of immersion, as she obviously has access to established schemas (creating established narrative expectations) from the narratives she has engaged with for pleasure – in her case written *and* visual, as was also be seen in the case of the students in the extra-curricular study. However, we have to ask, where would her frame of reference, and her expectations, be regarding the specifics of *Macbeth*? If the Young Adult (YA) novels she reads, commercial games she plays, and popular films and television shows she watches are similar enough to offer a series of generic storylines we might expect *Macbeth* to be too archaic for her to find an equivalent foothold in it. However, we have the evidence of her game and her writing to indicate that, once the initial difficulties most students experience with Shakespearean language are surmounted, this is not the case.

Possibly we could argue that the narrative forms employed by Shakespeare are so deeply embedded in English culture that she will have encountered them implicitly rather than explicitly in other text and media-forms, but that does not satisfactorily account for her transformation of the original text into something new and unique to her own experience of being in the world. This brings us to acknowledge the different layers of immersion one experiences in reading, watching, and gaming, and the fact that a young person versed in all three will happily elide the self-chosen or customised avatar of a game world with the narrative perspective of a written text. Students as consumers of texts across different media in this particular contemporary moment have access to a diversity of voices hitherto unexperienced

by those in Western culture. It is therefore right and natural that they no longer automatically assume the speaker of a text be white and male.

Furthermore, when we refer back to the work of Douglas and Hargadon, whom we referred to in the formation of the theorisations of immersion and engagement this thesis has been dwelling with, we see them go on to describe engagement by arguing, ‘the pleasure of engagement with hypertext fiction comes from users’ access to a wide repertoire of schemas and scripts, our attempts to discover congruencies between the hypertext and an array of often mutually exclusive schemas, and, ultimately, our ability to make sense of the work as a whole.’ (p.160) We are similarly forced to reconnect with the idea that *Macbeth*, textually, does not occur in a cultural vacuum, and students cannot help but bring their own textual experiences to bear on it. Within the confines of this particular project, Shakespeare’s play is only one resource, and one schema, that Leah used when building her game. The expansion into the wider resources of popular cultures is what makes Leah’s work an act of engagement, rather than simply one of immersion, as she is blending different structures she knows into a new kind of hybrid. If, as Douglas and Hargadan seem to suggest, engagement is hyper- and intertextual: the user of a text is driven, by a love for the text, to find linkages within and beyond it: in other words, their viewpoint is more holistic.

The representational details in Leah’s writing about expectations placed on women, however, also appears to stem from discussions on gender that occurred during lessons with her class, as during the year we explored gender and the exploitation of the character of Eva Smith in *An Inspector Calls*, the relative absence of women in the cluster of poems studied for their Literature Paper 2, and the absence of women versus the expectations placed on men in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. This tenor of discussion was, of course, also particularly marked in the context lessons on *Macbeth*, where female stereotypes ‘at the time of Shakespeare’ were addressed with her class.

In my teaching of the GCSE Literature content, I have always been conscious in challenging the text choices provided by the narrow English National Curriculum, in order to find ways for a diversity of students to find something for themselves in their studies. As I raised in my introduction, one of the starting points for this thesis was a concern that students are unable to find themselves in the white, British, and male skewed texts available to them, and the possibility that game design might be a way into texts like *Macbeth* for students who found them alien and alienating. My own pedagogy, however, is of less significance to this thesis than the learning that my students did: the primary focus for the various strands of this project is student experience.

As game design is not always an option, when we read *An Inspector Calls*, we look at the characters of Sheila and Mrs Birling as different models of ‘femininity,’ and explore the intersection of class and gender when we analyse the rape and exploitation of Eva Smith. We note the almost total absence of women in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, and query what models of masculinity and sexuality the novel might act as a metaphor for. Over the course of studying the poems we discuss representation in literature, across ethnicity, sexuality, as well as gender. These discussions are important not only for providing context for the studied text, but also for getting students to reflect on how the context in which a text is received can change our reception of it. It also encourages them to be critical on matters of politics and representation, which is not something the GCSE text options naturally inspire. In my experience, it is often the contemporary politics through which we study our texts that, in most cases, is what allows students to become immersed in their worlds, especially when married to pedagogical options like reading aloud or performing, creating resources that marry text and image, and any kind of activity that is more explicitly multimodal.

To return to the work around *Macbeth* particularly, in the early lessons in our exploration of it, time is spent discussing Lady Macbeth, her character arc over the play, Shakespeare's intentions in creating this role for her, her connection to witchcraft, the status of witchcraft in the Jacobean era, and how these factors affect Macbeth himself, as the eponymous tragic hero. Whether I am working with male or female students, as it is important to me that students do not take for granted that there are 'masculine' and 'feminine' stereotypes that they should unquestioningly conform to – everything is to be interrogated - and Leah's class became strongly involved in discussing the gender politics surrounding all of the texts, especially those concerning Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. For example, opinions amongst the class were strongly divided as to whether Macbeth and Lady Macbeth held the most power in the play, and who was the most to blame for the tragic series of events that occur over its five Acts. This is quite a common debate to have over the play, but the other textual resources that this particular group held as context were both unusually diverse and fascinating.

As previously noted, 'the pleasure of engagement with hypertext fiction comes from users' access to a wide repertoire of schemas and scripts,' (Douglas and Hargadon, 2001b), but for this class, the scripts in their repertoire included the span of *RuPaul's Drag Race*, *Love Island*, *The Hate U Give*, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, *Don't F**k with Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer*, all of these captured on streaming platforms like Netflix, representing the interconnect age of 'matrix media' (Jenner, 2016), and so their reading of their literature texts became inflected by the fiction and non-fiction they were reading and watching at the time. The list given is just some of the more prominent examples of what they found interesting about the world around them, namely issues of race (not surprising for an ethnically diverse and broadly working-class group of young people in the era of Brexit), true crime, relationships, and sexuality. With these alternative scripts fuelling discussion of *Macbeth*, Leah's choices in the creative writing aspect of her work seem, perhaps, less surprising. What

may be more surprising is her utilisation of more contemporary schema alongside her insistence with not disrupting the overall shape of the original text. In this decision, we can read strong evidence of her engagement. We can also make the argument that the broadening of a curriculum to include more diverse text choices is not to the detriment of a student's accessing of texts within the canon.

In her phrase '*... practically only seen as baby-making machines. Not me. Never me.*' We can observe Leah considering her own position as a young woman, her reflecting on why the character of Lady Macbeth may have been constructed to react in the way she does, and making a character who becomes a rebellion against the perceived expectations of the time, but also the lingering stereotypes still haunting today. When the interiority of Leah's written character is applied to her game's avatar – the third murderer – we see the extremity of the rebellion: not only does the character refuse marriage and motherhood, she becomes a professional assassin, who questions her own morality, by proxy of the player's choices. The written character, being made after the game, adds an extra layer to the moral complexity of Leah's partial game, as her voice claims agency, and does so in the tenor of more modern textual influences, as a modern Leah immerses herself in a Jacobean world. We are encouraged not to observe but to participate, and in our own choices become immersed.

When all of the above is considered – the conditions for immersion and engagement, and the materials with which young people assemble texts – it makes it difficult to speak with any authority of a single set of conditions for engagement and immersion, though the ideas of familiarity and safety as primary conditions do hold true. That engagement follows the pleasures of immersion also remains a realistic conclusion, though the initial entry point for an immersive state still requires more exploration, which we can follow through analysis of the work of two very different students in Leah's class. What appears to be beyond negotiation,

however, is that students must be able to encounter a text on their own terms in order for it to be meaningful.

Anna

In another creative student response, we see the character of Macbeth near the beginning of the play's narrative, granted interiority as he fights in the first battle, and then encounters the witches,

I awoke in a room surrounded by darkness, beams of light creeping their way through the narrow gaps in the iron bar gate. Little did I know that beyond that wall awaited the greatest battle of my life. With Banquo by my side, I knew that, no matter what I could count on him and that I would be ready.

I heaved up the gate that lay before me, unaware of what would happen, eager to venture out into the wilderness. I readied my heavy sword and walked out into the overgrown field, blood shed covered the horizon and the air was filled with the sounds of men and women screaming for their lives. I had no choice but to bring this to an end. I had no choice but charge into this battle. I have been in many battles throughout my life, but this was different. I couldn't get my mind to grasp what was happening and the reason behind it.

In the distance I could see 3 odd figures, somewhat womanlike and yet so masculine. I was uncertain if I should approach them. However with the blink of an eye they vanished and reappeared behind me. They chanted "The weird sisters, hand in hand. Posters of the sea and land. Thus do go, about, about. Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine, and thrice again to make up nine. Peace, the charm's wound up." Then one after another they gave me their apparitions, "All hail Macbeth, hail to thee Thane of Glamis" This I knew as fact. "All hail Macbeth, hail to thee Thane of Cawdor." This bewildered me. To my knowledge the Thane of Cawdor lived and was a very noble man. Finally, "All hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter."

King. That's what drove me to the edge and began my spiral.

This story opening is interesting for a number of reasons. The student, Anna, interweaves her own modern English with text lifted from the play, and we see, as for Leah and the *Beowulf* students, a strong sense of the visual mode. There is a tacit reference to events later in the play (Leah's scene, in fact) as she emphasises the friendship with Banquo that will later disintegrate. In this writing, however, the third text Anna is leaning on is, a combination of elements from her game and the arrangement of the Justin Kerzel directed film of *Macbeth* (2015) – her third text is variations on the same, studied text that is the starting point for her writing. This demonstrates the importance of being able to see scripts performed in some way,

even if on a screen rather than a stage, even if this will influence a students' ideas around representation.



Figure 19: Anna's game walk through

From her game, we can see the emphasis on the 'iron bar gate' [FIG. 19] leading out onto a field. The door that the player/avatar of Anna's game has to open to commence the game is such an 'iron bar gate,' demarcating the borderline between a dark inside space and an outside 'field.' However, where she describes how the, 'blood shed covered the horizon,'

we can see a link to a sequence of images from the 2015 *Macbeth* film, the opening of which is set against a dramatic red sky (Kurzel, 2015). The presence of the witches on the battlefield also can be seen as a reference to this particular film version, as they do not manifest during the battle in the original playscript [FIG. 20]. Representation as a metafunction is clearly important here, as Anna is caught up in a cyclical presentation of the same characters across different media. The



Figure 20: The witches in film and game

transmedia borrowing of her ideas across film, game and text are interesting in terms of our thinking about trace, but also in consideration of Discourses around ‘correctness’ and ‘Literature,’ and our understanding of engagement.

The Macbeth of this piece of writing is as self-reflective as Leah’s third murderer, and we realise by the end of Anna’s writing that it is written from an undisclosed future point, looking backwards at past events. Positioning him in this way makes him quite a sympathetic character, and we could suggest that maybe Anna wanted to establish him as a character players would develop an emotional attachment to, almost as an anti-hero, in order to encourage her audience to become immersed in the game and/or the story. The modern rendering of Macbeth’s inner monologue is very different to the one we get from his soliloquies in the play. His final words, in the play are combative, though containing a sense of hopelessness,

*I will not yield,/ To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse./ Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,/ Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,/ And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold,
enough!' (Shakespeare and Gill, 2009)*

The retrospection of Anna’s Macbeth, however, appears to be less aggressive and more guilt-ridden, as he is rewritten by someone engaged with creating a text out of resources from a very different cultural moment. Though she did not give specific examples of games that she played outside of school, Anna also expressed a desire for her game to include word puzzles, suggesting that she wanted to express the textuality of the original stimulus material within her videogame, demonstrating her engagement with different modes and resources, and, as with Leah, not necessarily viewing different kinds of texts as hierarchical or separate from one another.

Her desire for a more textual element for her game, combined with her detailed approach to her creative writing were an interesting development from her level of engagement with normal English lessons. As a student, Anna was never disruptive, but she was often

reluctant (in the sense of completing the minimum work to avoid sanction), so it appeared that there was something about the game design tasks that captured her interest, potentially through her connecting with third texts from outside of school. The ways in which the student-participants in this study immerse, engage and construct meaning has repeatedly demonstrated that their third texts are powerful bridging devices for them in their accessing of *Macbeth*. Whether we consider the students' creative work through the metafunctions of representation, interaction, and organisation, or through the four strata of Discourse, design, production, and distribution, we constantly see the complexity of what is occurring when they are constructing new texts in any media. The layers of representation at play, for example, offer us insight into the wider sense of identity individual cases are developing, whilst retaining a notion of the overarching stratum of Discourse provides a constant reminder of the factors that push and pull students in their work, but are broadly beyond their control. For Anna, being given an opportunity to control how characters in *Macbeth* were represented lead her to produce better assessable writing that might normally have been expected from her, and so we can return once again to the power of thinking in terms of immersion and engagement.

We also see how the students' acts of creation consistently push against the boundaries of text types in ways that are unexpected and interesting. Ugne's writing takes a different form than her classmates', but as we will discuss below, it is still possible to see the interplay of immersion, engagement, and the power of third texts.

Ugne

As Ugne is, outside of the classroom, a creative writer as a chosen hobby, though she did a simple write-up of her experience of game-making rather than doing something narrative-based when the class were assigned the follow-up task, she was happy to share with me her

‘novel in progress’ after the project, as some of the *Beowulf* students had been with sharing their drawings of character designs.

In Ugne’s ‘novel in progress,’ we can immediately see commonality with the choices she made in her game design through the accompaniment of the main protagonist by two mythical creatures, which we can link back to her original love of *How to Train Your Dragon*. We can observe her developing tastes too, however, as she creates a ‘steampunk’ aesthetic for the world of her novel – drawing from the Discourses of Fantasy, Science Fiction, and the Gothic – which is reflective of games such as one of the later iterations of the *Assassins’ Creed* franchise. Her third texts are used to frame her writing, as seen with the other participants in both of the case studies.

She spends a lot of time world- and character-building in her novel, so we can get a clear sense of the kind of textual product that she desires to write, even though it is currently only in its second draft. Her immersion in her creative work is indicative of the condition of ‘safety’ that I proposed as fundamental to the state. The fact that she has a wide spectrum of third texts to draw from is also important, as she has a large number of resources both to help her access more challenging material, and to utilise in engaging with the act of creating new texts for herself. Ugne has a particularly strong vision for the companion creatures in her story, which can be seen in this short extract,

Now, Vauka (and my raven-like bird Allie) are creatures called Umbrae. Around 200 years ago, a wide range of GM creatures escaped a research centre during its meltdown. They survived and multiplied, and are now normal sights in the wild.

A little fact about them: radioactive exposure in that facility led to their ancestors’ cells becoming immortal. Deathless.

Her writing-style blends details from her wider reading (the Discourse of Fantasy), feedback on her creative writing style in the light of what gains marks on the narrative task on the GCSE Language papers (different sentence lengths and varied punctuation), and real-world references on things that she is interested in (mentioning ‘GM’ or genetically modified

creatures). One of the places in her story is called 'Aragon' in reference to *Lord of the Rings*, and more obliquely later on, she uses the sentence, 'Cannon to the left of us, cannon to the right, we rampage.' Repurposing a line from one of her GCSE poems Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. The blend of reference points is interesting here, as she not only uses chosen third texts, but has assimilated taught material from her formal school setting. This could imply that she has already, through her immersion in a broader set of texts, achieved a comfortable third space between formal and home life, and is able to draw from both environments to inform her exam-focused writing (RQ3).

Her writing outside of the requirements of the classroom demonstrates the extent to which a student's work can be intertextual. When she is engaged, Ugne's work is a piecing-together of her textual world, as she uses whatever resources she has to hand. Though she felt less free to experiment with her *Macbeth* game, there are traces of intertextuality, with the dragons, and a marked attempt to explore the psychology of a difficult character. The different nuances of her engagement with this project are helpful in acting as a reminder that the categories of immersion and engagement can look different for each student.

It is worth noting here that all three of the girls referenced from the *Macbeth* study showed a marked preference towards writing in a first person voice, which we could argue is a design choice influenced both by the fiction they read outside of school, but also by the nature of both plays and games, think of the first person as the closest a writer can get to the function of a game's avatar. To live, a play requires performers, and games require a player, and in assuming of the possible worlds of the two media we assume an active role. There is a forced immersion in first-person narrative, but when we consider this through the conceptual framework of the Derridean trace, or the 'prying open' of text, we can conclude that this is not a bad thing. By attempting to create characters we live and breathe through, all of the students are situating themselves in an interactive relationship with their audiences, with their

communicative acts drawing in a readership to their designed and produced worlds. The leaning into of visual description, the world building with contextual detail, and the character construction discussed above are all examples of immersion and engagement that have emerged through a manufactured third space, crossing between and beyond the spaces of school and home.

Despite the deviation from the normal format of an ‘English’ lesson, it still feels appropriate to categorise the workshop as a ‘classroom’ experience. The classroom here therefore needs to be defined as such on four fronts: its location in a school space; its temporal location within the school day; the proximity of students and teacher; and the experience being an occurrence whereby a group of students ‘learned’ something. Furthermore, though not all students produced games, the whole class at least completed preparatory work on their assigned scenes, indicating familiarity with, if not immersion in, the text of *Macbeth*. It is possible to argue, then, that immersion could have occurred in two ways – though the textual relationship/space, and through the technological space. In the absence of the latter, the more in-depth stage of engagement did not occur, though in the latter part of the day where students shared their games, respectful conversations about and responses to the games indicated class unity. This sense of unity relied on physical space, not an ephemeral third space (Potter and McDougall, 2017).

The sense of unity amongst a body of students is important for immersion and engagement if it is to occur within the classroom, and the communications between students can make or break that unity, referring back to the immersive condition of safety. When a class is working between analogue and digital spaces, as Tapio acknowledges, it becomes important to shift our understanding of what student communication is and can be. This also requires an understanding of the different temporalities occurring across multiple spaces. Tapio argues,

Examining a situation where the participants interact simultaneously with each other in various spaces, virtual and physical, via several semiotic resources, raises a question of how the digitally mediated interaction should be treated in relation to simultaneous interaction in the physical space. While acknowledging that digitally mediated communication has radically changed the semiosis of everyday practices, my aim is to avoid treating digitally mediated communication any differently from other mediated communication taking place in complex multiparty interaction ... (Tapio, 2020, np.)

Reflecting on this statement, it is important to consider the nature of classroom conversation and to what extent a digital shift affects it. Tapio argues that ‘digitally mediated communication’ is no different from other ‘mediated communication,’ but various strands of scholarship, from the theory of multiliteracies (Cope and Kalantzis, 2000) to the work of Buckingham, Barton, and Kress (Buckingham, 2003; Barton, 2006; Kress, 1997) disagree on the basis of the literacy and learning that underpin any form of communication. The ‘literacy’ appended to ‘digital’ is particularly subject to debate in this instance as for communications to exist in a digitally mediated format, the interlocuter has to be versed both in the target language *and* the technology – see the class variance during the game design workshop as a case in point – as we know the idea of students as ‘digital natives’ is a myth (Kirschner and De Bruyckere, 2017).

It is not controversial to say that communication online is different from the kind of interactions that occur in real life, or even those that are partially digitally mediated in a ‘computer room’ in a school. The vast majority of teachers with pastoral responsibilities in recent years will have had to deal with the consequences of online actions that have transferred over into physical spaces in the school. In my own practice, before the extended period of COVID19 lockdown, this was virtually a daily occurrence, and it was always vaguely surprising to encounter a child whose parents regulated their use of social media, and therefore protected them from the perils of online life. The *Macbeth* study day, though not quite functioning as a *third space* as the *Beowulf* extra-curricular club did (Potter and McDougall,

2017; Bhabha, 1994; Gutiérrez, 2008), demanded a variety of modes of communication, and a variety of literacies, from the participants, including that they be able to articulate themselves digitally. The nature of the day meant that students were still in a position to be given instant feedback from a teacher, though, meaning communications were mediated, regulated, and, in some instances corrected. What is more, the relationships between peers as they sat face to face meant that there was a degree of pressure that communication be polite, or at least socially acceptable within the terms of the classroom environment.

Though the ‘classroom’ represented a shift from tables and chairs to computer desks, the case study was framed as relevant to the students’ study of a GCSE text. This was important for the nature of the class, as they were mostly very exam-focused, possibly to a certain extent because they were the ‘Top Set’ and had therefore been trained to perceive themselves as students in a particular light. As has already been alluded to, this self-perception of high achievement led to some students disengaging with the game design task, rather than ‘fail’ at it. However, these same students asked questions of and showed appreciation to their peers who had been more successful in the creation of their *Macbeth* games.

The shared experience of the *Macbeth* study day allowed, I would argue, some students to push their ability to communicate with one another into another mode, and though not all could ‘write’ in this mode, they could all ‘read’ it. The prior relationship students had with one another, and with the text of *Macbeth*, meant that the class maintained their identity as a class. The textual safety of their studied Shakespeare play appeared to be more important in any other factor for the class being able to engage creatively or critically with the day, and this was something built up over time, within the context of a classroom: mastery over the text allowed for transference between different kinds of classroom space.

9. Concluding Thoughts

Returning to the National Curriculum

As I raised in the introduction to this thesis, whilst the theoretical concepts for this project were inspired by work undertaken on a prior MA, the professional drive behind my work was a reaction against the reductive 2013 National Curriculum for English, and its unfortunate repercussions on the state of subject-English to date. Commencing this work as a teacher of English and Media, learning my professional craft during the introduction of the new curriculum, and witnessing for myself how students responded to it framed my work politically, foregrounding issues of equal access (across a variety of positions of need) in my practice. Though I have now left the secondary school classroom, my experiences in teaching were formative of my research interests now, and I believe fully that the overall findings of this study are applicable to pedagogy in wider contexts.

Though the texts the case studies dealt with – *Beowulf*, *Macbeth* – are comfortably situated both within the canon of Western literature and the Discourses of ‘appropriate’ narratives for the English Literature classroom, as has been explored herein, it is still possible for students of different backgrounds to reclaim these texts in a way that is empowering, to try and counter the lack of representation in the curriculum. Through taking a student-focused approach to introducing texts by accepting the validity of students’ third texts, whatever broad form these take, as gateways to teaching narrative, rather than foregrounding the idea of text-as-GCSE-content, one can begin to introduce an immersion in, and engagement with, learning, and a greater criticality of what is being taught. Through introducing carefully planned making activities, as demonstrated here with videogame making, it is also possible to layer student immersion and engagement with nuanced thinking about not only narrative, but also consideration of how one navigates through any given form of text, and as the data has shown, the results for students can be incredibly powerful.

Whilst I would argue unequivocally that the National Curriculum for English is inadequate (Connolly, 2021), and has done significant damage to engagement with- and uptake of- subject-English, I also appreciate that the process of fighting for its revision will be a long one, and likely one requiring a significant change of perspective at government level. Though the NC is the document that structures teaching content and examination form, however, I also believe that teachers can make adjustments to their practice within it to ensure that their students are not isolated from the opportunity to engage in texts in a variety of ways that can include the chaotic and joyful. As this thesis has focused on exploring, there are third spaces overlapping with, and adjacent to, schools, that can be found or created for students to experience unexpected modes of learning, and help them locate traces of themselves in texts that are unanticipated. Particularly in the experiences of resistant learners and EAL students discussed in the preceding chapters, it is clear that the creation of these third spaces can actively benefit the learning of literary texts, in ways that are unconventional, but very real.

Revisiting the Research Questions

Throughout this thesis, there has been an attempt to find a balance between evolving the proposed theoretical framework, and exploring how the reconceptualised terms might be practically applied to the classroom. As I have returned to throughout this writing, this balance was necessary for me to find, as my practice as a teacher was the main drive behind my research. It felt difficult to me to justify researching in my place of work if there would not be some kind of benefit for the students as the participants, in terms of ‘general’ ethics, and as I hope has been made clear, there was, in most cases, a demonstrable benefit for most of the students involved through their opportunities for creative experimentation with texts. In the methodology, I evoked researchers concerned both with the overall messiness of research in the Social Sciences, but also with the complexities of researching in your own place of work

(Law, 2004; Mellor, 2001), and again, I hope I have accurately reflected the realities of the research experience in my previous place of work.

The RQs, which I will now evaluate in light of the writing above, were presented as:

1. *How can 'immersion' and 'engagement' be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?*
2. *What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?*
3. *How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?*

Though I have attempted to be consistent in returning to each of these questions throughout my writing, it is helpful here to review them more fully, as well as looking at any limitations or issues that have arisen in dialogue with the RQs throughout the research process.

How can 'immersion' and 'engagement' be redefined for the English classroom, and how far can they be considered as useful pedagogical terms?

To begin with, the broad ideas of immersion and engagement emerged from observations made during the research undertaken during my MA work with the *Beowulf* group. They were then developed into concepts for this project through an interrogation of the ways in which they are already used in Game Studies, in education, and in casual use. The exercise of redefinition proved a useful spine for this research as I was forced to think through how such ideas are often used lightly, casually, rather than being deployed with specificity, and how much more can be drawn analytically from data when the right framing for them is found.

In the theory chapter, I stated that, immersion, *'refers to an active relationship between person and text, whereby the person and the text are held together by a trace of one another; immersion requires some form of mediation; immersion involves a structure that is beyond the control of the person, but that they can exist safely with.'* I then went on to argue that, the conditions for this state include:

1. A sense of safety or comfort in the space of 'reading' and in the text itself.

2. That the student is able to find themselves in some way reflected in the text.
3. The space for play of some manner of structure, most commonly narrative.
4. A shifted sense of presence.
5. The building of ownership and confidence that can lead beyond the narrative to engagement as a form of play within and around the text.

The work underpinning this definition, particularly the Game Studies scholarship of Murray and McMahan (Murray, 1997a; McMahan, 2003b), and the representative ideas from Derrida's oeuvre, specifically trace and lack (Derrida, 1997a; Derrida, 2001b), led to the framing of immersion as a more tentative, though still active, state, and one that implied a deep relationship with a text or creative process. By defining it in this way, I would argue that it becomes more pedagogically useful for the English classroom, because it suggests that the experience of immersion can be structured for any student if sufficient attention is paid to creating a sense of safety and familiarity. Here, the developed idea of third texts proved a useful extension on my initial ideas, as it allows for the suggestion that any narratives that a student is familiar with can be deployed in the teaching of more challenging material (Potter and McDougall, 2017). As a reconceptualization, it also posits that any form of inclusion need or socio-cultural barrier can be worked around in order to allow students access to texts, which is a stance vital to any teacher of subject-English.

For engagement, meanwhile, I stated that, *'it refers to a metacognitive state where a person takes elements of a pre-existing text and repurposes them; where a person expands on or disrupts the boundaries of a text; where the creator takes control.'* Then, I suggested that the conditions for this state include:

1. A sense of ownership or control over the resources of the text, whether individually, or as part of a social group.
2. A desire to create with and expand on the source text.
3. A sense of confidence that can lead to the comfort and safety required for the student to be (re)immersed in the text.

Again, by developing ideas around engagement in this way, it is possible to imagine how a classroom practitioner might use this as a point of consideration when building activities in lessons and across schemes of learning. The opportunity to ‘play’ with a text, to recreate or remediate it, creates a different experience of learning, and while this is hardly a revolutionary idea in studies of pedagogy, when built into a cyclical relationship with immersion, we can shift our understanding of the different ways in which such a state might be fostered, which is conceptually novel.

To begin with, I had assumed a linear relationship leading from immersion to engagement, but the cyclical interplay observed between the two states suggested that a creative and playful introduction to text teaching to secure engagement could then lead back to the state of immersion. This proved a helpful insight into considering how one might approach the teaching of examination texts to reluctant learners. Though videogame making did not prove to be a successful strategy for all of the students involved in the *Macbeth* group, the principle still holds, and could be used to inform other creative pedagogies applicable to individual teacher’s classrooms.

The findings from the two case studies discussed in the previous chapters evidence the nuances of the reconfigured theories across several instances, however there are also findings that suggest these concepts require further refinement. The notion of the ‘third text’ which has consistently arisen across student interviews is one key thinking point. The location of the learning experience – classroom or extra-curricular, book learning or technological intervention – is another. Social literacies and the social aspects of learning were also more important than I had initially anticipated, particularly demonstrated through the shared language of the *Beowulf* group, though I would argue that students can still experience immersion and engagement by themselves. Finally, there are the individual, student-centric considerations,

that any teacher has to account for when balancing the learning of a class. This leads us neatly onto a revisitation of the second Research Question.

What are the factors that create or inhibit immersion and/or engagement?

Discussing both case studies, I describe examples of the ways immersion and engagement, as redefined for the project, can manifest, but I also found cause to consider how the terms might not be expansive enough to account for the multiplicities of experience young people bring on their learning.

The contexts that are personal to each student are, obviously, significant for the third textual hooks they require to find immersion and engagement. As can be observed across both studies, the ways in which third texts can be leveraged include the repurposing of different semiotic resources to make sense of the new taught text, particularly in references to genre and narrative. As such, one of the most powerful ways of fostering immersion/engagement was to create space for students to bring their third texts, whether *Doctor Who* or *EastEnders*, to the creative space in the extra-curricular club or the classroom, removing a sense of textual hierarchy. Third texts could act as a scaffold for new creative work, or could provide schema through which new and more challenging texts could be understood, and as such, their utility was more important to the project than maintaining a demarcation of what school Discourses would understand to be classroom appropriate-level texts or not. The other powerful tool that emerged was the social aspect of literacy, and allowing groups of students to discuss their influences, whilst developing their own shared language – the significance of this had not been accounted for in the original research design. The evidence provided by the case studies clearly demonstrates the positive impact of both the social interactions of the student-participants *and* the strength of the use of third texts in the classroom for securing immersion and engagement.

These combined factors had demonstrable positive impact for the involved cohort, justifying the work from the perspective of myself as a teacher.

What was more surprising, however, was the extent to which the Discourses of ‘school,’ ‘classroom,’ and ‘learning’ filtered down from teachers and parents to shape the expectations students had of the learning that was supposed to happen in a given classroom space, as this dimension to the case studies prevented some students in the *Macbeth* group from fully participating in the experience. The trace of these Discourses proved to be unescapable, and, I would argue, are another hint at the significant changes required in England’s education system. Furthermore, other insidious school Discourses also appeared as inhibiting factors on the sense of safety that students need to become immersed/engaged, particularly those around ‘correctness,’ ‘legitimacy’ and exam appropriateness, with students like Leah and Aiko warping their ideas to fit into the original and ‘correct’ shape of *Macbeth*. When these Discourses are acknowledged, we can recognise the more unfortunate side of the relationship of traces at play between students and texts - the trace of the sense of an exam-perfect act of textual analysis or creative writing holds its opposite in relation: the exam-inappropriate and therefore ‘failing’ act. Some of the students in the *Macbeth* cohort would rather avoid or disengage with the game making than do ‘badly’ at it, or would fight against it as an unwelcome intrusion into ‘normal’ classroom learning. In the *Beowulf* group, meanwhile, it was the students working in English as an Additional Language (EAL) that struggled to remain involved the most, largely due to feeling their learnt English did not have the same legitimacy as the utterances of their native-speaking peers, indicating some significant lacks in terms of inclusion at both school and curriculum level. Both of these sites of resistance present challenges to how texts might be taught, and how a teacher can foster immersion in and engagement with learning. The response to these challenges would most likely not look the same for any two teachers, however an awareness that these issues are probably consistent

across different school contexts, and a foregrounding of the relational or social aspects of teaching is clearly of fundamental importance.

Whilst teachers cannot control the individual contexts of their students, they can plan for navigating the factors that create and inhibit immersion and engagement when considering their English Literature pedagogy. Controlling the classroom space, whatever it looks like, means deciding how to frame texts and tasks, and being mindful of how discussions about learning and exams are managed with students. One of the main conclusions I have drawn from the two case studies is the importance of recognising that students can find themselves in any text, but that in order for this to happen with more reluctant learners, the teacher has to be prepared to introduce taught text in dialogue with third text. This is one way, but not the only one, of finding third spaces between creative work and exam-style writing.

How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?

The stepped introduction of students to the desired taught text – for both *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* – was important in helping students to conceptualise how game design might work. This form of creation was universally new to the participants in both case studies, and as such required careful planning for, as has been described both in the methodology and the game design chapters for each case study. The creative writing that followed was planned for, but the process of writing happened more organically as it replicated a ‘normal’ classroom activity.

The game design choices for the *Beowulf* group were heavily influenced by the students’ third texts, largely *Skyrim*, and their more chaotic forms of play were inspired by AAA games that they were not capable of recreating using MissionMaker. Their writing, however, was much more layered, heteroglossic even (Bakhtin, 1981), drawing in details from *Beowulf* itself, the students’ various third texts, parts of the shared language the group had

developed, and details from the games themselves, validating both the overall pedagogical choices for the project and the decision to draw in the use of student third texts. The process of planning the experience of a player, via the proxy of an avatar, created an alternative mode of textual navigation, more so than if the students were just playing existing games, because they had to think from the perspectives of both the player and the game-author operating in time and space.

The nuances of the connections between the game designs and the subsequent writing were even more interesting for the *Macbeth* group. With the games themselves, the original play text was, for reasons of the text's exam status, a much stronger influence, but the students' third texts – *Temple Run* as a strong example – were also visible in the design choices. When it came to the writing tasks, as the social makeup of the class was of a different nature to the extra-curricular club, shared language was less of an implication on their writing, with students like Leah producing excellent writing that was instead idiosyncratic to her identity as a young, black woman. Meanwhile, the students' third texts were still fundamental to their writing, but so was the Discourse of 'correctness' in terms of their adherence to the published form of the play. The games that they made were very consciously 'correct' to *Macbeth*'s narrative, and the writing inspired by the game making experience extended the exercise of seeing how far the boundaries of the acceptable could be pushed, whilst the writing be satisfactorily creative. For both this group and the *Beowulf* students, the writing that they produced was 'creative,' but also 'assessable,' as was one of the conditions for this research. As we have seen, however, the 'assessable' forms of writing do not have to be boring and can arise from immersed and engaged states that demonstrate a love of learning. The pathway from game design to written text can be viewed as one of the 'contributions to knowledge' made by this project, as the structure of the student activities was novel, and the outcomes were clearly significant for some of the participants, implying useful further research.

The ‘third space,’ then, between the games and the writing might well be pluralised, as there are a number of ways we can conceptualise it in light of the data. One third space that we can argue for is game design acting as an intervention between the spaces of home and school. Another way of framing the same idea would be the use of third texts as the third space between the student’s home-texts and school-texts. The third space could equally be any kind of non-standard creative intervention that, taking a taught text as its starting point commences with a non-written creative act, and then leads back to recognisable creative writing. The framing of this pedagogical structure with the establishing of the conditions for immersion and engagement revisited above can allow for an expansive approach to ‘assessable’ writing that shifts the boundaries of how students are able to conceptualise writing, and how they are able to approach the task.

Limitations of the case studies and areas for further research

Of course, there are limitations to the research discussed in this thesis. One of the major issues in the work presented here is that part of the data is drawn from my prior MA research, which means that there is not one overall, single research design for my thesis. Furthermore, if I were to design the methodology of the *Beowulf* project now, I would do things differently with the benefit of more years’ experience as a researcher. However, in defence of this, I would argue that the data yielded by the *Beowulf* study was rich enough to make it worth revisiting in greater depth than was possible in its original context. Of course, in any field of work, we improve as time goes on, as we accumulate lived experience and develop in our practice (Schon, 1984), and this thesis itself is an initial step on my professional journey out of classroom teaching.

Additionally, the interruption of COVID-19 meant that any further intervention originally planned could not take place due to the national lockdowns. This factor, at least, was beyond my control as a researcher, but did require me to adapt my plans significantly from what originally had been envisaged in terms of the collection of student writing, student reflections, and student grades from the cohort. The lockdowns meant that there were no opportunities to draw additional classes of students in for game design workshops, building on what had been learnt from the initial cohort, as I may have been able to do had school buildings remained open. Broadening the number of participants would have been very beneficial in terms of exploring wider examples of third texts to view against student writing, as well as opening out the possibility for considering how different students' contexts might have influenced the experiences of immersion and engagement I have defined above, refining the concepts further. As noted in an earlier chapter, running the next phase of this project with an explicitly 'challenging' group would have been an interesting test, though this was not practically possible with the school closures.

As discussed throughout this thesis, there are also many opportunities for further research. The case studies discussed are small, and though the *Beowulf* group were observed over a number of months, the *Macbeth* group were viewed through only a snapshot of their study of their GCSE play text. Due to this, the first and most obvious line of future research would be to embed game-pedagogy as part of a full scheme of work for a target class, and to extend its use over more than one day of study. Through doing this, a researcher would be better placed to track the effects of game design on learning with greater depth and, ideally, across more students. The ideal scenario here would be make more use of game designing in informing pedagogical strategies used later on in a scheme of work.

Additionally, whilst the *Beowulf* group was both mixed gender and mixed academic ability, there was less diversity (in this respect) with the *Macbeth* group, so it would be interesting to follow a similar form of pedagogical intervention with a group of boys or a mixed group. For similar reasons, it would be a beneficial research strategy to see game design used in both different academic ability (and mixed ability) groups, and also to see how students from different kinds of school settings might respond to game design used in the teaching of a GCSE Shakespeare text.

Broadening the data in this way would also be an opportunity to continue to evolve the concepts of immersion, engagement, and third text, as well as providing greater scope for exploring how ‘Media’ can filter back into the English classroom, even without significant curriculum change, which I would argue would be of immense benefit to secondary school students. It would also be interesting to track the emergence of common third texts, and to see how student-chosen texts change over time.

The Nature of ‘Classrooms’ and ‘Lessons’

The third Research Question for this thesis - *How can productive connections – academic third spaces - be found between creative game design work and GCSE-style required writing, when the conditions for immersion and engagement are created?* – framed this thesis with a spatial metaphor. Then, the introduction of the various strands of theory dealt with above – trace, immersion, engagement, third text – expanded the spatial with metaphors for textual space and phenomenological or experiential space. What unifies these ideas, however, is rooted in a real space, that of the classroom, and the Discourses around it that dictate how we conceptualise it, what can be permitted to happen there, and how it can be located, culturally.

For all of us, the kind of school you attended, and where that school was located, will have left you with a very specific idea of what a classroom should look like. Through your

years as a student, you became used to Science or Art or English classrooms looking a specific way in deference to accepted activities for a subject. That familiarity may breed a sense of safety or anxiety depending upon the academic subject taught in that space and your relationship to it or its teachers. Whatever your school experience was, and whatever subjects you studied, however, it is very likely that you will have a clearly defined, and likely uninterrogated, understanding of ‘classroom,’ and ‘classroom experience,’ situated within the common Discourses of the educational system you grew up with.

It is frequently the case in our contemporary moment that young people in England, where the research for this study took place, particularly in larger schools, expect classrooms to be multimodal to a greater or lesser extent, with electronic ‘smart’ boards, analogue visual materials, and possibly with the presence of PCs or iPads, though the age, location, and ‘success’ of a school can have a large effect on the quality and functionality of any classroom-based technology, reminding us that deprivation can haunt every aspect of school experience. Even if the classroom spaces themselves do not provide digital resources for individual students, it is often the case that when students continue their learning outside of the classroom for homework or revision, they do so with reference to the internet, suggesting that no school text exists without a digital context in the English school system. Within the classroom, however, technological access is a variable rather than a fixed point, though the experience of ‘learning from home’ during the COVID-19 lockdowns also taught teachers that student experience of technology at home was even less predictable, and access was widely inconsistent. Consequently, the work completed for this thesis implicitly raises issues of the role of technology in learning, and how it might be a positive intervention in traditional classroom space, but also how a teacher can utilise non-digital third texts to foster immersion and engagement regardless, to improve a students’ experience of subject-English. In raising

these issues, however, it also reminds teachers of related concerns about digital access and real-world skills that students may or may not learn in the classroom. We can argue that inconsistent access to technology forces us to acknowledge that one cannot speak of a single ‘classroom’ space, as there is no one model for what a classroom is, only Discourses that suggest there is. At the same time, teachers are called to be inventive in their approaches to curricula, in order to do the best possible job for the students in their care, which will always be context-dependant.

Though students may learn multiple digital literacies across different spaces, digitality has never formed part of the Discourses around how one should ‘properly’ teach English Literature, even whilst students often find digital resources helpful to their memorising of literature ‘content’ for their exams. As I presumed that a lot of students would value digital resources as a part of their education, it was interesting to observe the variance in engagement with and without digital resources to hand during the case study. Even for students attending the same school, residing in one class group, they appeared to have widely various ideas of what a classroom should be, and how far they were willing, as a group, to allow those boundaries to shift. Technology as a learning tool for literature was similarly approached with varying degrees of success and engagement, as students operated in the classroom-MissionMaker spaces on their own terms, and via their own third texts or Discourse positionality. Consequently, immersion and engagement as concepts, though tested digitally in this project, can and should be decoupled from being explicitly digital in form, as they can exist in purely analogue spaces.

Classrooms can be understood as contested spaces in various other ways too, through the battles over curriculum content, whatever current teaching practice is considered the most effective (Hattie, 2008), and the extent to which teachers should adapt their practice to

incorporate digital technologies. In relation to thinking about how teachers should adapt to different spaces and technologies, Harris argues the following,

“Today’s students are immersed in a world of technology from birth. It is natural for them to live within the internet, rather than using the internet as is likely the case for their teachers and parents...” (2) “The premise for work on effective spaces to support learning, was that recurrent educational innovation, especially as linked to the integration of ICT, would in time drive a significant pedagogical shift, leading to improved student learning outcomes.” (8) “Space is both a fixed and fluid notion. It has an enormous impact on how we feel and think – the very core of our experiences of life. The challenge for schools is to identify the different spaces it inhabits – virtual, pedagogic and real, and to draw these together in meaningful ways so that learning can focus forward, enabled through technology and not get dragged backwards.” (Harris, 2010, p.12)

Based on this view, we can see some similarities to Prensky’s, much contested, ‘digital natives’ rhetoric (Prensky, 2001), which causes us to question if the centralisation of technology is over exaggerated, and the shift in scale not so great, as might be argued from a postdigital perspective (Knox, 2019). However, the references to space resonate with what has been observed in the *Macbeth*, classroom-based case study, and therefore requires further consideration, beyond the boundaries of this project. To what extent is immersion dictated by different versions of mediation? And therefore, to what extent is engagement possible if the form of mediation is not perceived as a safe space for any particular student? Certainly, inside the parameters of this thesis, not using classroom technologies to teach literature does not represent students being ‘dragged backwards,’ and some students would have been happier without a digital intervention in their studies. During the COVID-19 lockdowns, my students were very clear that what they wanted was to be in a classroom rather than behind a screen, so it is evident that there is a great deal of overstatement when some theorists seek to write about young people’s relationship with technology. This thesis introduced screentime as only one method of pedagogy, and so should have functioned within the reasonable expectations of students. The contribution to understanding of the concepts of immersion and engagement can be read, therefore, as not wedded to digital spaces, but as ideas functioning in broader ways.

Classroom spaces are not identical, neither are the experiences and opinions of individual students. What creates the classroom experience for this particular group is their proximity to one another, and the presence of their teacher to direct them and answer questions. The particular classroom case study outlined in the *Macbeth* chapters was made possible through a multimodal, digitally enabled classroom. Despite this, the technology itself did not offer an equal experience for all students, and relied heavily on the intervention and direction of the adults in the room. The fact that the day was also in a format that was outside of the usual school experience for students additionally meant that they needed help in settling down to work, though this was aided by the familiarity of the text. Again, this highlights the importance of space for immersion and engagement, which was not sufficiently addressed in the initial reconceptualization of the terms.

The more general lessons about classrooms and learning that can be taken from this thesis are that trying to find a consistent or overarching narrative to describe what goes on in schools is difficult, as these vital spaces are multiple and complex. However, in accounting for the mess (Law, 2004) inevitably present in research on lived experience, it is possible to find a sense of hopefulness that, as no space/time is fixed, there is always a trace of the possibility for change, or a lack for a willing teacher to exploit. In experimenting with new pedagogies as a form of resistance against restrictive curricula, teachers can and should find ways to immerse and engage their students that are rightfully theirs, as exemplified in the work here.

What has been most joyfully expressed through the case studies discussed in this thesis is how, when the teaching of literature is at its best, students can find a love for the most unlikely of texts. By breaking away from the strict adherence to the National Curriculum's model of exam-English, what has been demonstrated in both the *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* groups is that students *can* be incredibly creative in how they engage, in non-hierarchical ways, with the assembling of formal and third textual resources. By introducing game design as another

creative layer, students from both groups transformed classic texts, in an immersed process of design/production or representation/interaction, from classics into something that lived and breathed for them. By fostering immersion and engagement in these two difference school spaces – the PC Lab and the extra-curricular club – it was possible to find a delight in learning that has too often been lost in recent years, as well as contributing to the field(s) of study in demonstrating how the use of games design, media pedagogies, and student-selected third texts can, in clearly demonstrable ways, foster learning that is, in some instances, more developed than what would have occurred for students otherwise. It is, therefore, possible to retain a sense of hope that subject-English can once again grow in scope and vision, and regain its soul for those who study and teach it.

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