Game Instructors as Cultural Workers: Dialogic Teaching and Intercultural Games Higher Education

Bruno de Paula

UCL Institute of Education / UCL Knowledge Lab

Abstract

In this paper, I discuss the potential that a dialogic approach to teaching game (design) in an intercultural postgraduate classroom in UK Higher Education can have in unsettling limited and universalist models to engage with videogames. Through reflections on my own teaching practice, supported by interviews with former students who undertook my course in the period between 2019 and 2022, I argue that we, game educators, can be understood as cultural workers, as suggested by Paulo Freire (2005). This argument is supported by the concept of game literacies and Freirean critical pedagogies, more specifically his ideas on dialogic teaching – one that understands 'dialogue' as the mutual understanding of interlocutors' realities – which I argue offer paths towards a more critical and less dissociated games education, bridging the rift between vocational and critical approaches, and fostering more nuanced models to engage with games as a global – intercultural, interconnected – phenomena.

Keywords: games education, game literacies, critical pedagogies, intercultural Higher Education, reflexive teaching practices, dialogic teaching

Introduction: Teaching Games in a Digital Media degree and Game Literacies

Teaching games in Higher Education (HE) is a challenging task. Games are multidisciplinary (Khaled et al. 2018), requiring a balancing act among different fields of knowledge and disciplinary traditions. In contemporary HE, games education is also the terrain for a struggle between competing models of education, and games programmes often gravitate around (or attempt to thread a fine line between) vocational or cultural/critical approaches (Barba 2022; Prax 2020; Rouse et al. 2023). During the last few years, a growing body of research

explored the teaching of games in HE settings, including in relation to specific pedagogic strategies to teach game studies (Bergstrom 2021; Waern 2013) and game design (Bettochi et al. 2020; Geyser 2018; Prax 2020), students' motivations and expectations (Harvey 2019), and curricular formation and student experience (Keogh et al. 2023), both in the context of industry-oriented (Ashton 2010; Harvey 2020; Weiller 2021) and experimental (Phelps et al. 2020; Westecott 2020) approaches. The work I present here, reflecting on my first three years teaching games in UK HE, contributes to this growing body of literature, more specifically, in the interplay between students' repertoires, knowledges and the role we, game instructors, play as mediators – or, following Freire (2005), as cultural workers – in a course about games within a broader 'digital media (practice)' master's degree in the UK. To introduce the topic, I offer in the paragraph below a short anecdote on my initial teaching experiences in the UK HE, which inspired me for carrying out this research.

During my first year of teaching in this degree, coincidentally, the first year the degree discussed here was running, and the first year I found myself teaching games to an overwhelmingly 'international'[1] cohort, I often found myself 'out-of-sync' with my students when it came to my assumptions about their (previous) knowledge about games. Among my greatest failures were sessions in which I had grounded the technical teaching I was asked to do – namely, an introduction to programming through Unity3D – in games I believed were quite popular (Pokémon and Mario Kart), to realise that less than half of my students had played (or, after a show of hands, knew) these games. In this situation, rather than supporting a learning moment, my contextualisation ended up increasing the complexity, since I had to explain both context and content.

The anecdote above illustrates recurrent issues in games education, namely, the disparity between different experiences that students might bring into the games classroom in HE (Bergstrom 2021; Phelps et al. 2020; Zagal et al. 2008). While the work presented here indeed resonates with this literature, there are some distinctions at play here. Most of the literature focuses on game-specific degrees – either at undergraduate or postgraduate level – whereas in my case, this was an 'isolated' game course within a broader digital media degree, culminating in a broader range of abilities and interests. While there were, akin to the context discussed by Prax (2022: 197), students with more expert knowledge and interest in games than in an average media and cultural studies postgraduate cohort, a considerable number of our students, as it became clear during my teaching, were not only novice players, but also

generally uninterested in games, signing up to this course simply due to the lack of alternatives.

I argue that this context (in which, besides mixed abilities, there are also mixed interests) requires a different approach from what is usually found in games HE. In this case, I assumed a position in which production/practices should not be dissociated from critical perspectives, following the principles of game (or ludo) literacies (Apperley et al. 2013; Buckingham et al. 2007; Prax 2022; Zagal 2010). Game literacies are conceived as an umbrella term to define all the competences (functional and critical) needed to engage with digital games: for Zagal (2010: 23), for example, these would include: '1) the ability to play games; 2) the ability to understand meanings with respect to games; and 3) the ability to make games'.

While discussions on game literacies have been more consistently employed outside HE settings – the exceptions being Zagal (2010) and Prax (2022), however none within a deeply intercultural setting as the one discussed here – I argue here that game literacies are a relevant model in HE exactly because it can address critical and technical competences in tandem, bridging the gap between the two different usual models – vocational and critical – of game education found at HE (Barba 2022). The critical competences discussed here are not, as criticised by Ashton (2010), seen solely as a set of discrete practical skills useful mainly for game reception or production, but also as an intellectual endeavour involving reflections, for example, on the structural and material conditions of game reception, production and circulation, something that is often underplayed and taken-for-granted, especially in the context of industry-oriented programmes, as identified by Harvey (2019) when researching game-related HE programmes in the UK. On the contrary, an education that is aligned to critical game literacies must necessarily engage with and address 'broader systemic and collective issues' Prax (2022: 208).

By emphasizing a look at systemic conditions, game literacies can be useful lenses not only to orientate our (game educators') teaching practices. Games are known as a contemporary cultural practice, with its own traditions and cultural codes, including for example aspects related to fan-based behaviour (see Lima et al. 2023; Navarro-Remesal 2017) and exclusionary identity-based forms of engagement (Gray 2012). In the process of enculturating someone in games, we (game instructors) might also end up reifying the same structures we aim at challenging. My opening anecdote on my first year teaching failings can be seen as an example: on their paper on games HE, Zagal and Bruckman (2008: np) discuss how assuming

that students are necessarily familiar with particular games can ‘have unintended effects on the diversity of people who could become future members of the field. Implicitly requiring incoming students to have years of experience with certain genres of games marginalizes those who don't’. By assuming my students were necessarily familiar with two Nintendo game series, Pokémon and Mario Kart, I imposed my own expectations and realities – i.e., of a millennial Latin American within a Western context – onto my students. My shock, consequently, could be interpreted as a nod towards the ‘deficit model’ of education, as if students were necessarily lacking and were in need of unilaterally receiving my knowledge as empty vessels (Freire 2000b).

My assumptions and impositions at the time were, to some extent, opposite to my own positioning as a scholar, more specifically, in relation to the hierarchical value attributed to certain experiences and knowledges within games (de Paula 2021a), including which games one should know (Consalvo et al. 2019). Recent scholarship in Game Studies (Apperley 2010; Penix-Tadsen 2019; Swalwell 2021), however, challenge this idea, reiterating the value of the ‘local’ to produce a more nuanced understanding of videogames as a ‘global’ phenomenon. In other words, ‘global’ should not be seen as a synonym to ‘universal’ (e.g., using mainstream contexts as a conceptual model that can be applied anywhere), but as a constellation of different, often interconnected contexts, with commonalities and specificities; ‘global’, in that sense, should be seen as pluriversal, as argued in decolonial approaches (Eklund et al. 2024; Mignolo 2011).

This clash – between my initial teaching practice and my position as a games scholar – demanded constant reflection and adjustment of my teaching approach (Schön 1991). While this kind of reflective process is – or at least should be – a fundamental cornerstone of any kind of teacherly practice (Pollard 2019), these out-of-sync moments with my students were, in many instances, Freirean (Freire 2000b) teaching moments. As I got to know my different students throughout the years, it became clearer that rather than lacking, they often knew games, but the kind of ‘game cultures’ some of them knew were different. Acknowledging and respecting these differences is important to recognise games as a global – interconnected and intercultural – practice, but also to recognise my own classroom as an intercultural learning site. Recognising the intercultural nature of these encounters (between instructors and students) becomes increasingly important in my work context, the UK HE sector, with its increasing cohorts of ‘international’ students, and the encroachment of neoliberal ideals signalling towards a university model that is subservient to an universal, acontextual idea of

games industry – an idea challenged by Keogh (2023). But how to leverage the intercultural nature of the classroom in an approach that fosters game literacies without necessarily reinforcing epistemological hierarchies?

In this situation, I found a possible path by turning towards critical pedagogies, more explicitly, in acknowledging how teaching is, rather than a purely transactional practice (with knowledge being transferred in a unidirectional way, from teacher to student), a dialogical exchange: 'whoever teaches learns in the act of teaching, and whoever learns teaches in the act of learning' (Freire 2000a: 44). In this particular context, a Freirean (Freire 2000b) dialogic approach – one that understands 'dialogue' not as a synonym to 'conversation' or 'discussion', but the mutual understanding of interlocutors' realities – becomes essential if we, game educators, aim at disrupting universalist models.

This paper, therefore, is a reflexive examination of the potential that a dialogical approach to teaching game (design) in a postgraduate intercultural classroom in UK HE can have in unsettling limited and universalist models to understand videogames. By reflecting on my own teaching practice, supported by interviews with former students who undertook my course in the period between 2019 and 2022, I argue that we, game educators, can be understood as cultural workers (Freire 2005). Our practices as game instructors, including here how we deal with different experiences and knowledges – e.g., how we make space for inexperience in the classroom (Bergstrom 2021), or how we might reevaluate our own understandings and expertise after certain encounters (Pollard 2019; Schön 1991) – can have substantial relevance to work towards critical game literacy, envisioning a less homogenous understanding about games, beyond mere vocational-oriented, acontextual approaches, as criticised by Rouse and Malazita (2023). Critical pedagogies – as discussed and explored by other game educators (Bettochi et al. 2020; Prax 2020, 2022; Rouse et al. 2023) – are crucial to this endeavour: following Freire (2000b), if students must be able to read the word and read the world, game students must not only be able to make games, but also to understand the (multiple) contexts in which they are produced, distributed, and discussed. In this paper, I focus on the relationship between students' repertoires and game literacies; more specifically, in how their experience throughout the module might have changed their relationship with games.

Context & Methods

This paper is part of a larger project, in which I investigated the motivations and main takeaways from international students, most from East Asia, to study a practice-related digital media master's in a so-called elite university in the UK. In this paper, I focused specifically on my teaching about digital games through three different iterations (between 2019-2022) of a particular course I led, named 'Digital Game Design'. While I have led this module throughout its three different iterations, the module was co-taught with different colleagues (none of them for more than a year), and I led most (at least 8 out of 10) sessions.

The teaching discussed here was linked to a particular one year master's degree in digital media focusing on media production, epistemologically aligned with media and cultural studies and research-creation approaches (Chapman et al. 2015), with a critical-practice orientation (see Westecott 2020). While several of the students enter the course expecting a vocational-oriented approach (Barba 2022; Rouse et al. 2023), the marketing materials are not as aggressive in that aspect as found elsewhere in the sector (see Harvey 2023). The degree has no specific technical prerequisites, which means that we often have students who are well-versed in working with game engines sitting alongside students who do not have any experience in media production. Students have technical workshops throughout the year to support their technical development – the teaching mentioned in the opening anecdote happened in the context of those workshops.

In all iterations of the degree discussed here, cohorts were mid-sized (40-50 students), most (in all iterations, more than 90%) so-called international students self-identifying as East Asians. While I have already reflected elsewhere about the broader motivations and challenges implicated in this transnational educational endeavour (de Paula forthcoming), in this paper I focus more specifically on students' relationship with digital games, including their expectations and main takeaways from this games course.

Despite being labelled as an optional course, all students had to sign up to the 'Digital Game Design' module due to the lack of other options. During this 10-week course, all students were expected to, after being introduced to relevant game design and game studies theories, follow an approach grounded on research-creation to produce a game and a reflective essay that unpacks and contextualise their game production practice. Students could decide to work individually or in groups of up to 4 members. After the first iteration of the module, students were also asked to produce a development journal. The expectation was that students would produce games in Unity3D (an engine they were introduced to in the previous trimester),

however, they were free to use different platforms as long as they could justify their choices, with a number of students preferring either Unreal or, in some cases, RenPy or Twine.

This project is a case study grounded on interviewing former students. I focused on former students to mitigate potential issues around power imbalance, since current students might feel that criticising the course could lead to negative repercussions. With the absence of a system to track and maintain contact with former students, I adopted a snowball strategy, recruiting and interviewing 7 students between May-July/2023 (see Table 1):

Table 1: Summary of students interviewed

Pseudonym	**Year**	**Undergraduate course (Country)**	**Role during interview**
A	2020/21	Advertising (China)	PhD Applicant
B	2020/21	Advertising (China, with a semester in the US)	VFX Artist
C	2019/20	Broadcasting and TV (UK)	Entrepreneur
D	2021/22	Film (Hong Kong)	PhD Candidate
E	2019/20	Advertising (China)	Gamesworker
F	2019/20	English and Theatre (UK)	Digital Media Artist
G	2021/22	Digital Media Technology (China)	Tech company worker

In these interviews, I discussed students' trajectories, their game-related experiences, including their affective history with games and a comparison between their expectations and takeaways from the game (design) course. While interviews constitute the main data source for this paper, following the reflective-practitioner tradition (Pollard 2019; Schön 1991) I also revisited my own experiences – including materials generated throughout the different iterations of the course described here – to contextualise and reiterate how such elements might have played a role in my teaching practices.

In order to explore emerging trends across their experiences, I employed a reflexive thematic analysis approach, favouring an "open, exploratory, flexible and iterative" (Braun et al. 2019: 593) process by acknowledging my own role as both researcher and part of the degree's teaching team in interpreting this data, rather than focusing on reliability.

Findings and Analysis

Understanding Students' Experiences with Games

As discussed in the opening section of this paper, my experiences during my first-year teaching were often based on misconceptions and out-of-sync moments. These 'failures' created the backdrop for a growing interest in knowing more about my students, and both my teaching and the interviews gave me insights into their preferences and knowledges. In the interviews, I asked students about their relationship with games, both in terms of playing and making, and how they saw themselves in relation to gaming as a cultural practice.

Firstly, as it could be noticed in Table 1, most of the students interviewed came from an undergraduate degree where games were either absent or relegated to a marginal position – the exception being participants G, who mentioned having studied game development in her previous degree, and participant F, curiously, the only participant initially uninterested in videogames, who had a specific elective course on 'writing game narratives'. This does not mean, necessarily, that students were uninterested in games in general.

A common pattern identified throughout interviews was a growing interest in playing, usually starting with local productions and smaller games during earlier years, sometimes shared with friends and relatives. Participants singled out how a combination between material conditions (i.e., lack of access to hardware and limited distribution conditions in China) and parental control over gaming often limited the range of their experiences. Most participants indicated that it was during their university years (therefore, just a few years before starting the degree discussed here) that their gaming habit became a recurrent practice, and relate that to access: to free time, to equipment, and to other types of production, especially Western AAA games, as it was the case of Participant A:

> I started to play during primary school, I liked racing games, but at that time, most families did not have computers in China […] I often went to my neighbour's house to play. Also, in China, we are expected to focus on studies during High School […] but at university I picked up games again, I would play games when I have no study scheduled, and I'd often go to Internet cafes with my friends.

Participant A's narrative resonates with that offered by other interviewees, even though the balance between hindering access factors could be slightly different, as reported by participant E:

> During Junior High School I started to play some local Chinese single player game, Chinese Paladin… it was also at that time that I got my first console, a Nintendo Wii, but my parents would only let me play Wii Sports, because it was like exercising […]. After graduating from high school, I started to play some foreign AAA games, like Assassins' Creed and Watchdogs.

The parental influence was not necessarily a hindrance in all cases, however. Student D, like her peers, report an intensification of gaming during university years, as a bonding activitiy with her father:

> When I was a Y1 undergraduate […] I started playing again, because my father started playing games, and I did not go back home often. I played many games on the Switch, Zelda, It Takes Two […]. I would have a video for video call with him, and we would exchange some information about how to pass through a level […] that made me feel like we were exploring a virtual world together, and that was one of the main reasons why I started playing more often.

Exceptions here are participants F, who defined herself as a new player, someone who 'only [started] playing games on my last year of my bachelor's course' – since she was doing an optional module on writing for games – and B, whose playing trajectory was marked by specific genres:

> I started game playing games very early because I had two older cousins that were very into MMORPGs. For 10 years we wasted our time into it […] And then one of them went to university, so I started to play a lot of JRPGs and visual novels.

While discussing in-depth these player trajectories – and their intersectional relationship to, for example, gender (Carr 2005) and local distribution conditions in China (Nakamura et al. 2021) – goes beyond the scope of this paper, what becomes important in this section is the interplay between similarities and differences, both in relation to former students' formational experiences in terms of gaming, and how their repertoires created classrooms that both resonate with and diverge from what is reported in the literature regarding the challenges in a game classroom.

As indicated by my initial anecdote on my 'contextualisation failure' moments, it becomes clear that former students' gaming repertoires were considerably different from what I (naively) assumed. This does not mean, necessarily, that interviewees were not interested or

did not know games; rather, it meant that their gaming experiences (and, consequently, some of their preferences) were different, mediated by the particular conditions they found themselves in growing up. While this sounds like an obvious conclusion, this understanding becomes important when we reflect about the role played by the 'global' rhetoric that surrounds games as a cultural practice: sure, games are a globally disseminated practice, with actors (e.g., particular studios and manufacturers) that might have a global reach, but that does not mean that their reach is equally spread around the world. In this scenario, the rhetoric often employed to legitimise games as a relevant contemporary practice – the overused arguments grounded on absolute numbers of players around the world, or the amount of money that can be linked to the so-called games industry (Keogh 2023) – tends to obfuscate how, at personal and local levels, gaming practices and experiences are different (Apperley 2010; de Paula 2021a).

While local conditions and practices offer some nuance to understand players/students, they should not be deployed to homogenise players/students' experiences. While most of them presented a similar narrative in relation to when and how gaming became a more relevant practice in their lives – e.g., during university – and this process can somehow be related to their backgrounds (as hinted by participant A in her explanation about free time), the kinds of games they played, with whom and for what purposes are quite different. In other words, just because students might come from similar cultural backgrounds – therefore, influenced by similar sociocultural local conditions – it does not mean that they are homogeneous (de Paula 2021b).

Similarities and differences, however, do not attenuate the challenge of teaching heterogeneous cohorts: as discussed by Zagal and Bruckman (2008), diversity on the backgrounds and experiences can make it difficult to lay a common educational foundation, creating what Geyser (2018) names as a downward spiral in instructors' capacity to model knowledge formation. In the following subsection, then, I reflect about some of the pedagogical strategies I adopted to address these issues, highlighting my role as a cultural worker in the Freirean sense (Freire 2005).

Acknowledging and Expanding: Pedagogical Strategies towards Game Literacies through playlists

Considering the differences within the classroom, my initial response was grounded on the critical pedagogies of Paulo Freire (2000b), focusing on a dialogic approach, appreciating every actor's (i.e., instructors and students) realities and knowledges, and establishing constructive dialogues towards critical thinking. Such processes, in multiple occasions, depended on what Freire (2000b), in the context of dialogic teaching, names as desocialisation, moments that unsettle and invite reflections over apparently 'given' social norms. While not using this term, Bergstrom (2021) exemplifies desocialisation when discussing the 'positively disruptive' potential in situations where newcomers join game-related courses, since they are less habituated to – or, in Freire's terms, 'desocialised' – game-related norms and conventions. In the context of this course, desocialisation often meant challenging students understanding about what a game is (and what constitutes a 'good game'), how they usually are produced and by whom. This desocialisation process, in other words, aim at creating a space for reflection towards the development of critical game literacies.

One of the ways of fostering this desocialisation process was through the implementation of an essential playlist, using specific games to (sometimes) acknowledge and validate, and (sometimes to) expand students' repertoires. In the context of fostering critical literacies, games were also employed as linking elements between readings and practical exercises. Following the strategy adopted by other scholars (Zagal 2012), I ended up selecting a range of different games between free and smaller ones – catering therefore to students who were not experienced players and acknowledging the challenges in relation to time for playing long games (Zagal et al. 2008) – and somewhat mainstream, but *difficult-to-categorise* games. A broader range of games – including paid, Western, mainstream options – was also available to students via a shared Steam account hosted at our media production lab, to which students had access virtually any time during working hours. When choosing a game for the playlist, I often aimed at bringing into the classroom games that were made in different regions and through diverse regimes of production, in order to promote the idea of global games – rather than reinforcing an idea that 'proper games' are only produced in specific parts of the world and by specific actors (Keogh 2019). This is not to say that the diversity of examples, per se, is enough to challenge universal models or to promote critical literacies, but is an initial step, and with critical discussions and reflections that challenge to universalits models – e.g., hierarchies between *good* and *bad* games, discussed in depth by Consalvo and Paul (2019) – can happen.

Every week, between a more expositive lecture and a practical exercise, I (or, in few instances, another instructor, with my support) led a structured play session to signpost elements and foster a shared vocabulary, as implemented in other courses (Geyser 2018; Waern 2013), and in the following paragraphs I describe two particular examples, one in linking and validating some of students' experiences with games, and the other, in expanding students' repertoires.

As I got to know more my students, the differences in repertoires became more evident. I noticed, for example, that a consistent number of students, like participant B, tended to refer to visual novels and point-and-click games during in-class discussions, often referring to very specific genres, such as *otome* (Ganzon 2019). It was not uncommon, though, to see other students – and in some instances, staff – to scorn visual novels as irrelevant due to, for example, an alleged lack of interactivity – a problematic assumption considering how, following Fizek (2022), interactivity is a poor concept to describe and analyse games. In this instance, my reaction throughout the years was to bring in more examples of games that could either be categorised as visual novels or, at least, shared certain commonalities with such genre. This included, for example, bringing in since 2020, in a session about procedural rhetoric (week 4), *Nanopesos*, a Twine game produced by Camila Gormaz (2019) about being a young professional living with minimum wage in Chile.

Nanopesos was an important playlist item because it worked towards desocialisation in two ways at least. Firstly, students – already familiar with Twine and its association with visual novels – experimented a game that shared a visual novel aesthetic and mode of production, seeing therefore that genre and mode of production being validated in class, challenging therefore the rigid hierarchies embedded in mainstream gaming cultures (Consalvo et al. 2019). Secondly, in a broader argument about the pluriversal approach to teaching, despite being from a completely different geographical context, *Nanopesos* resonated with most of our students' anxieties – most of them, like the protagonist, were young adults on the brink of starting their professional life – challenging the idea that meanings are necessarily bounded to their own localities. In that sense, the example of *Nanopesos* furthered the intercultural vein in this course (Freire 2005), recognising the differences in localities, but exposing similarities across different contexts.

While *Nanopesos* worked as a hybrid case – at the same time, acknowledging and expanding students' repertoires – in some instances the desocialisation process was more explicit. An

example here is my use of *Katamari Damacy Reroll* (2018), the designated game for week 1 and that very few students across all instances knew. *Katamari* worked both as a way to challenge usual ideas around game design and coherence – following Ruberg (2022), its loosely structured gameplay gives a sense of chaos – as well as connecting to the practical workshops on game development. *Katamari* was also productive in the sense it ended up challenging commonsensical ideas about games – that games are necessarily *fun* or *entertaining*, for example. For this session, in all instances students were asked to play Katamari Damacy beforehand. We started with an initial lecture, introducing the course, to later discuss their conceptualisation of games, play and why people play games. We later moved onto a live, in-class, play session of *Katamari.* The following word cloud was generated during the first session on 2019-20 and represents students' perspectives towards *Katamari* after playing it:

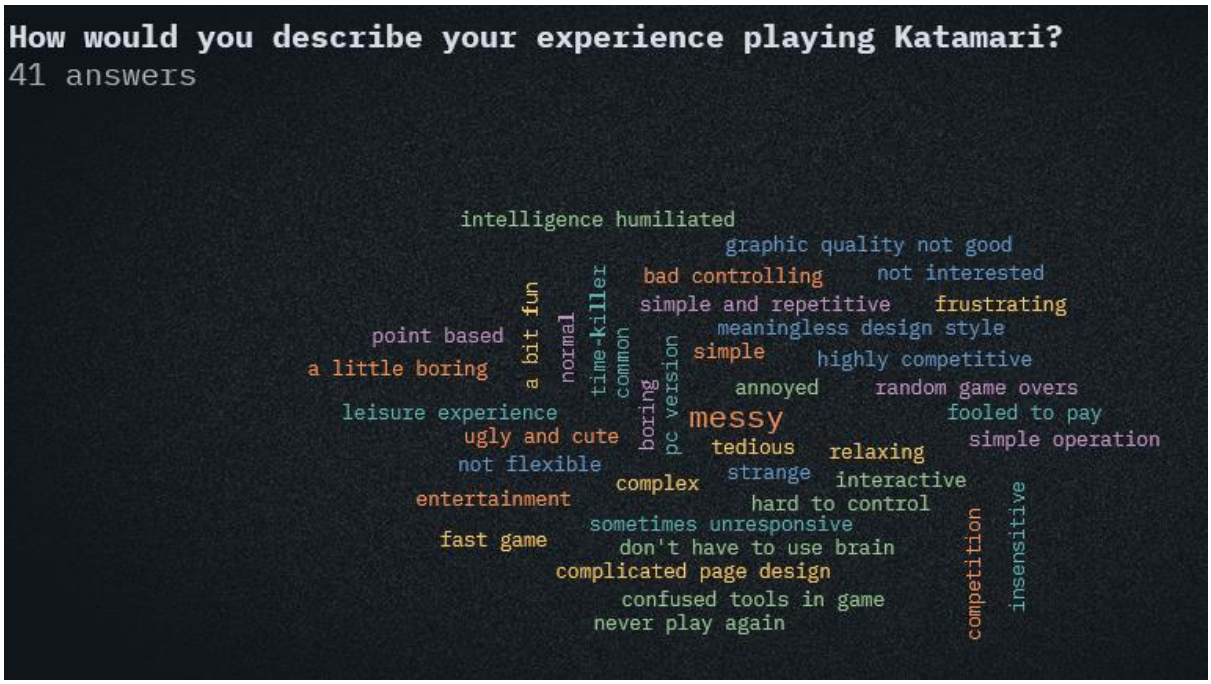

Figure 1: Word cloud generated by 2019-20 (morning group) students after playing Katamari (source: author's archives)

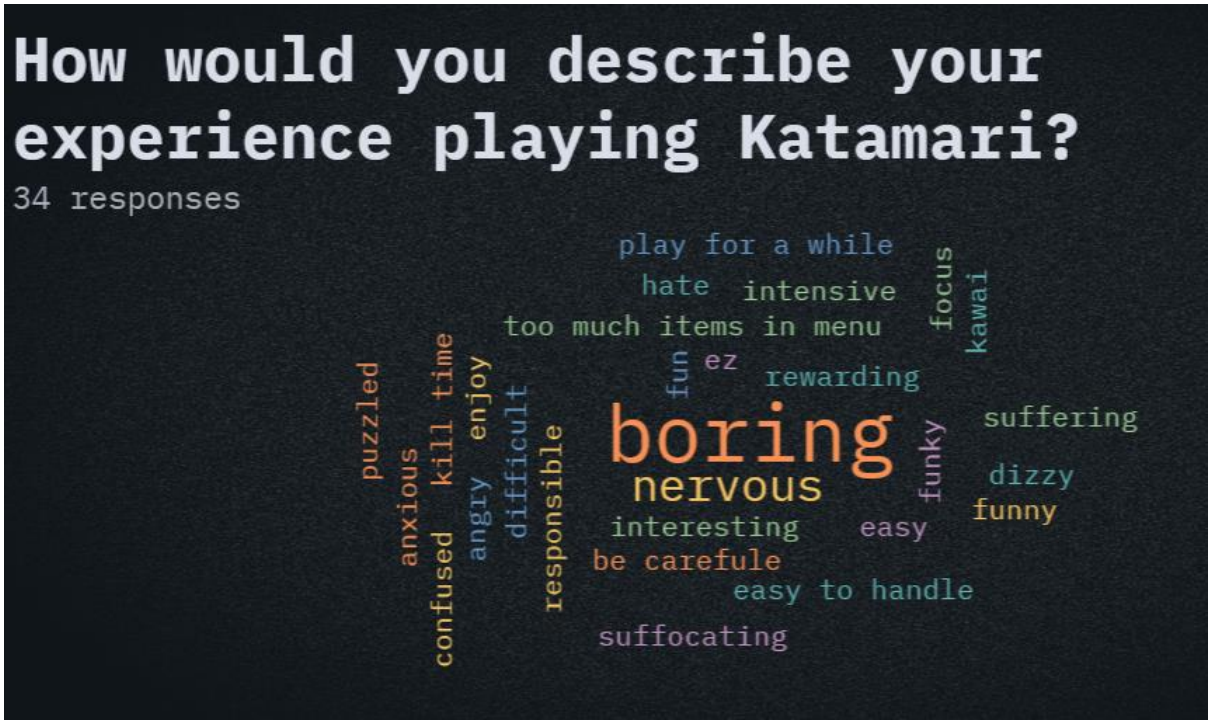

Figure 2: Word cloud generated by 2019-20 (afternoon group) students after playing Katamari (source: author's archives)

As noticed in Figures 1-2 above, several of the comments can be considered negative (e.g., boring, messy, bad controls, ugly). The discussion then moves onto *Katamari Damacy*, as discussed in *Game Design Workshop* (Fullerton 2018), challenging students to articulate why such game – that they did not enjoy – is part of a(n important) Game Design manual. Were they missing something, or is that just representative of the diversity contained in game design and gameplay? And, more importantly, even if they did not like *Katamari,* were there any lessons to be learned (as game analysts, as game designers)? This reflective exercise sets the tone for the ethos of this course, unsettling commonsensical ideas about games – represented by values that are often uncritically repeated by students such as the desire for responsive controls, highly polished graphics and the need for 'immersing' the player/interactor, an aspect criticised by Fernández-Vara (2019) in the context of games education –, while working towards expanding these students range of experiences with games through desocialisation (Freire 2000b) and development of criticality in how to engage with and make games.

Such criticality, however, should not be limited towards the student but, as a reflexive teacher (Pollard 2019; Schön 1991), to my own practice, including what is being taught and what

kind of cultural work I – as an educator – am doing. An example of such reflection and course correction was the introduction of a more nuanced post gameplay discussion on Keita Takahashi and the nature of game-making/game design. In my first iteration of the module, without that nuanced discussion, I ended up replicating the triumphalist-personalist, reverential tone usually employed to discuss the work of (usually cis-male) game designers, as criticised by different authors (Nooney 2013; Ruberg 2022). In more recent iterations of this session, I introduced an explicit discussion on the collective nature of work in games, grounded, for example, on Weiller (2021). Such intervention – reflecting on how we deal with the history of games, and the collective nature of the work – pave the way for future sessions that focus, for example, on the so-called game industries (Keogh 2023) and different modes of game production around the world.

‘it's a different perspective towards all games’

In most of my interviews, students detailed how their experience throughout this course led to shifts in their relationship with videogames, not only as players, but also as makers. As players, students often mentioned how they became more receptive, for example, to different genres, as in the case of participant B below:

> I would explore games, not like just go with the flow, just go into my favourite subgenre and stay there. I started to […] more actively try to figure out what it is that I like in all types of games. I also became more tolerant to games that I usually never liked, and I start to feel the charm of it, […] that I kind of can dissemble these open world games into things like as a subject to study.

This difference is not only limited to students who did play before, but also helped students whose interests – before the degree – did not lie in digital games. An evident case is student F, who recognises below the relationship between a pedagogy that is grounded on expansion of repertoires in an inclusive way and the fostering of new knowledges and understandings about games:

> I really liked how you had like these, I will call, case studies … like that running ball thing [Katamari Damacy], and then we built that later… just like these little references

> games […] I think that was the best way of teaching for us, because it really stuck with me.

> before I used to be so overwhelmed by games […] but then, after the course, it gave me the security, because today I will experience games, and I'll be like 'hey I know how to do that'. […] That is also very rewarding for me, because before when I look at games, I would just be [that kind of] people that [would say] 'It's so new', 'It's only for entertainment', 'you need a big team', or whatever. And then, after the course, I was like 'yo, there're so many possibilities'.

As it is possible to notice on participant F's passage above, her relationship with games changed not only in terms of her media practices, but also in ontological terms: we notice in her speech a reappraisal of certain norms and values, e.g., that games need big development teams. The all-encompassing model fostered by game literacies (Prax 2022), integrating analysis, critical thinking and production – as hinted by the excerpt above – indicates how such approach can promote these shifts towards a wider understanding of digital games.

In all my interviews, former students related the experience of playing different games to a shift in the way they perceived games as a field, not only in relation to the desocialisation process as described earlier, but also in relation to the grounding of analytical and reflective ways of playing to interpret games. Reflecting on her experience throughout the course, coupled with her recent training and work experience in a games company, student E mentions below the shift in perspectives when choosing and playing a game:

> Of course [the course] has changed my experience. I try more game genres, not only those I liked before. […] Now that I am in the industry I also pay more attention to game elements that I would not have paid attention to, the placement of objects in the scene, for example. I will pay attention to the lighting, maybe to the walls […] before this I would never pay attention to that, I would just think it's natural.

As described by all students here, the process of encountering and playing different games (ones that they were not necessarily familiar with) helped to destabilise earlier ideas about

gaming, including challenging ideas that might have just been seen as natural. This process is similar to that discussed by Ashton (2010) in his work with game design students in UK HE, more specifically, in how this development of a trained eye in noticing aspects that before were ignored, is an important part of the process after undergoing games education in HE in a critical production context such as the one discussed here.

More importantly, the wider range of games, combined with strategies to unpack what these different games proposed, moving beyond descriptive approaches to game analysis – as criticised by different authors (Fernández-Vara 2019; Zagal et al. 2008) – supported these students into moving towards a different mindset, being able to analytically engage with games, not only contextualising them in relation to a broader corpus of works, but also to appropriate such language in their own work. This process can address one of the key challenges in games education according Phelps and Consalvo (2020), pertaining not only to ideation – i.e., pitching game ideas, as in the 'soft' model of criticality discussed by Ashton (2010) – but also contextualising these ideas within the 'wider conversation', both in relation to other games and in how these games become (or not) part of diverse media circuits.

This understanding of games in a contextualised broader picture is, arguably, one of the most relevant elements here, since it is key to developing students' autonomy (Freire 2000b), rather than simply transmitting knowledge onto students. The relationship between a broader understanding and autonomy is well-articulated by participant B's, when asked about her expectations and main takeaways of this course:

> the thing first came to my mind was like specific explanations on how different games have different design methods, like a 2D platformer, and how to make them 'good'. [But] What would you say what I got was a different perspective towards all games. […] I was very happy for what I got because that's what I needed for what I wanted to make.

In this case, what we notice is how, rather than being offered a step-by-step guide on 'how to' make games – more problematically, one that would reinforce the 'rights' and wrongs' in this process – participant B recognises her learning experiences as more open, one that is relevant and applicable to multiple possibilities and scenarios. What we notice, then, is a step towards the autonomy defended by critical pedagogies and literacies, one that affords more open views towards games – aligned, therefore, to the intercultural and pluriversal ideals of this

kind of education – and that offers students means to further develop their competences autonomously.

Final Thoughts

In this paper, I have recruited game literacies and critical pedagogies to discuss how game instructors can be seen as cultural workers. Teaching practices have a transformative potential in how we shape students' relationships with games as a cultural practice. In the case discussed here, I presented an expansive model of games education that aims at developing critical game literacies through critical pedagogies, more specific dialogic teaching in intercultural settings (Freire 2000b, 2005). In adopting such model – one that rejects games as a narrow, isolated field, that sees games in HE as necessarily subservient to technical endeavours (Rouse et al. 2023) or to neoliberal drives in HE towards employability and job-readiness (Keogh et al. 2023) – I argue that it is possible not only to foster more critical and nuanced vistas on gaming as global – intercultural and interconnected – contemporary practice, but also to promote autonomy so students are well-equipped to develop further their own interests while navigating these global spaces. Such approach depends, as discussed before, in a dialogic approach that includes acknowledging differences in knowledges and realities, expanding these realities and critically examining norms and conventions, often through desocialisation (Freire 2000b) processes.

The work presented here, however, is not without its limitations. The case discussed here is a very particular pocket of HE, and the limited number of interviewees indicate that not necessarily all views might have been captured. A potential view missing is that of the international student who underwent consistent processes of epistemic violence (Mignolo 2011), and comes with particular expectations about studying a creative discipline in the 'West', expecting to learn from what they see as an authentic ('proper') environment, in opposition to the inauthentic (media) context they are coming from, as discussed by Gu and O'Connor (2019). While I believe it is my role, as a cultural worker, to challenge this view, it would be interesting to capture such discussions – and whether this approach in fact works towards a more 'pluriversal' perspective on games for these students.

Despite these limitations, I argue that such approach, grounded on critical game literacies, indeed has potential to bridge the gap between different modes (vocational, critical) of games

education (Barba 2022). An argument here is how students who underwent this course progressed into different sectors and careers (academic or not), including in relation to the common anxieties over employability and job-readiness in the creative industries, as shared by student E:

> Strangely enough, I still remember you said [when teaching Digital Game Design] that 'taking this course won't make you find a job at [Western AAA studio]'. But to my knowledge, many from our class did find jobs in well-known game companies. Maybe this course does have this power…

While I – and other educators working in this degree – should not take all the credit for our students' successes, it is important to consider that the kind of cultural work we do makes a difference, not only in terms of employability, but also in how games are seen as a multifaceted contemporary cultural phenomenon, impossible of being comprehended through universal narrow and limited models.

Acknowledgements

This project has been evaluated and approved by this HE institution's Research Ethics committee (REC1797). The author thanks all students who underwent this course.

References

Apperley, Thomas (2010), *Gaming Rhythms: Play and Counterplay from the Situated to the Global*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures.

Apperley, Thomas and Beavis, Catherine (2013), 'A Model for Critical Games Literacy', *E-Learning and Digital Media*, https://doi.org/10.2304/elea.2013.10.1.1. Accessed 2 June 2020.

Ashton, Daniel (2010), 'Player, Student, Designer: Games Design Students and Changing Relationships With Games', *Games and Culture*, 5:3, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412009359766.

Barba, Evan (2022), ‘Unboxing Games Education’ (eds R. Rouse, B. B. Marklung and A.-S. A. Taylor), in R. Rouse, B. B. Marklung, and A.-S. A. Taylor (eds), *What Happens When We Play*, n.p.: ETC Press, https://press.etc.cmu.edu/node/6028. Accessed 21 June 2023.

Bergstrom, Kelly (2021), ‘What If We Were All Novices? Making Room for Inexperience in a Game Studies Classroom’, *Digital Culture & Education*, 13:2.

Bettochi, Eliane, Klimick, Carlos and Perani, Letícia (2020), ‘Can the Subaltern Game Design? An Exploratory Study About Creating a Decolonial Ludology Framework Through Ludonarratives’, Tampere, http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/DiGRA_2020_paper_376.pdf. Accessed 13 October 2021.

Braun, Virginia and Clarke, Victoria (2019), ‘Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis’, *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11:4, https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806.

Buckingham, David and Burn, Andrew (2007), ‘Game literacy in theory and practice’, *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, 16:3.

Carr, Diane (2005), ‘Contexts, gaming pleasures, and gendered preferences’, *Simulation & Gaming*, 36:4, https://doi.org/10.1177/1046878105282160.

Chapman, Owen and Sawchuk, Kim (2015), ‘Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments’, *RACAR: Revue d’art Canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 40:1.

Consalvo, Mia and Paul, Christopher A (2019), *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

de Paula, Bruno (2021a), ‘“Emergent countries play, too!”: The Zeebo console as a (partial) decolonial project’, *Revista Contracampo*, 40:2.

de Paula, Bruno (2021b), ‘Korean Soap Operas, Telenovelas and Sci-fi Conspiracies: A Game-making Experience with Latin American Youth in London.’, *Digital Culture & Education,* 13:2.

de Paula, Bruno (forthcoming), ‘Encounters and disencounters in becoming creative workers: motivations and experiences of postgraduate East Asian students in an elite UK university’.

Eklund, Lina, Gluzman, Renard, Jørgensen, Kristine, Kayali, Fares, Roinioti, Elina and Pnueli, Vered (2024), ‘Games for the Pluriverse: Exploring the Use, Opportunities, and Problems of Drawing from Local Cultural Heritage in Video Games’, *Games and Culture*, https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120241234126.

Fernández-Vara, Clara (2019), *Introduction to Game Analysis*, New York: Routledge.

Fizek, Sonia (2022), *Playing at a Distance: Borderlands of Video Game Aesthetic*, Cambridge: MIT Press.

Freire, Paulo (2000a), *Pedagogy of Freedom Ethics, Democracy, and Civic Courage*, Blue Ridge Summit: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Freire, Paulo (2000b), *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum.

Freire, Paulo (2005), *Teachers As Cultural Workers: Letters to Those Who Dare Teach*, 1st edition, Boulder (Colo.): Westview Press.

Fullerton, Tracy (2018), *Game Design Workshop: A Playcentric Approach to Creating Innovative Games*, 4th ed., Boca Raton: CRC Press.

Ganzon, Sarah Christina (2019), ‘Investing Time for Your In-Game Boyfriends and BFFs: Time as Commodity and the Simulation of Emotional Labor in Mystic Messenger’, *Games and Culture*, 14:2, https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412018793068.

Geyser, Hanli (2018), ‘Decolonising the Games Curriculum: Interventions in an Introductory Game Design Course’, *Open Library of Humanities*, 4:1, https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.217. Accessed 11 April 2022.

Gormaz, Camila (2019), *Nanopesos*, https://laburatory.itch.io/nanopesos. Accessed 2 April 2024.

Gray, K. L. (2012), ‘Deviant bodies, stigmatized identities, and racist acts: examining the experiences of African-American gamers in Xbox Live’, *New Review of Hypermedia and Multimedia*, 18:4, https://doi.org/10.1080/13614568.2012.746740.

Gu, Xin and O’Connor, Justin (2019), ‘Teaching ‘tacit knowledge’ in cultural and creative industries to international students’, *Arts and Humanities in Higher Education*, 18:2–3, https://doi.org/10.1177/1474022218824554.

Harvey, Alison (2019), ‘Becoming Gamesworkers: Diversity, Higher Education, and the Future of the Game Industry’, *Television & New Media*, 20:8, https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419851080.

Harvey, Alison (2020), ‘Freedom from the industry standard: Student working imaginaries and independence in games higher education’ (ed. P. Ruffino), in P. Ruffino (ed), *Independent Videogames: Cultures, Networks, Techniques and Politics*, n.p.: Routledge.

Harvey, Alison (2023), ‘Making sense of gameswork: University marketing materials as games paratexts’ (eds R. Seiwald and E. Vollans), in R. Seiwald and E. Vollans (eds), *(Not) In the Game: History, Paratexts and Games*, n.p.: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, pp. 177–94, https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110732924-010.

Keogh, Brendan (2019), ‘From aggressively formalised to intensely in/formalised: accounting for a wider range of videogame development practices’, *Creative Industries Journal*, 12:1, https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2018.1532760.

Keogh, Brendan and Hardwick, Taylor (2023), ‘Creative, Technical, Entrepreneurial: Formative Tensions in Game Development Higher Education’, *Games and Culture*, https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120231176874.

Keogh, Brendan (2023), *The Videogame Industry Does Not Exist: Why We Should Think Beyond Commercial Game Production*, n.p.: The MIT Press, https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14513.001.0001. Accessed 14 July 2023.

Khaled, Rilla, Lessard, Jonathan and Barr, Pippin (2018), ‘Documenting trajectories in design space: a methodology for applied game design research’, New York, NY, USA:

Association for Computing Machinery, pp. 1–10, 7–7 August, https://doi.org/10.1145/3235765.3235767.

Lima, Leandro Augusto Borges and Varga, Bertalan Zoltán (2023), 'Motivations for nostalgia in the Nintendo fandom', *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 40, https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2023.2303. Accessed 2 October 2023.

Mignolo, Walter D. (2011), *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Nakamura, Akinori and Wirman, Hanna (2021), 'The Development of Greater China's Games Industry : From Copying to Imitation to Innovation' (eds O. Sotamaa and J. Švelch), in O. Sotamaa and J. Švelch (eds), *Game Production Studies*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, pp. 275–92.

Navarro-Remesal, Víctor (2017), 'Museums of Failure: Fans as Curators of "Bad", Unreleased, and "Flopped" Videogames' (eds M. Swalwell, A. Ndalianis and H. Stuckey), in M. Swalwell, A. Ndalianis, and H. Stuckey (eds), *Fans and Videogames: History, Fandom, Archives*, n.p.: Routledge.

Nooney, Laine (2013), 'A Pedestal, A Table, A Love Letter: Archaeologies of Gender in Videogame History', *Game Studies*, 13:2, http://gamestudies.org/1302/articles/nooney. Accessed 20 July 2021.

Penix-Tadsen, Phillip (ed.) (2019), *Video Games and the Global South*, Pittsburgh, PA: ETC Press.

Phelps, Andrew and Consalvo, Mia (2020), 'Teaching Students How to Make Games for Research-Creation/Meaningful Impact: (Is Hard)', New York, NY, USA: Association for Computing Machinery, pp. 1–7, 17–17 September, https://doi.org/10.1145/3402942.3402990. Accessed 6 June 2023.

Pollard, Andrew (2019), *Reflective Teaching in Schools*, Fifth edition., London: Bloomsbury, Reflective teaching.

Prax, Patrick (2020), 'Boal on a Boat - Teaching Critical Game Making'.

Prax, Patrick (2022), ‘From Talking about Loot Boxes to Discussing Political Economy: Conceptualizing Critical Game Literacy’, *Gamevironments*, 17, https://doi.org/10.48783/gameviron.v17i17.180.

Rouse, Rebecca and Malazita, James (2023), ‘Critical Disciplinary Thinking and Curricular Design in Games’, *Design Issues*, 39:1, https://doi.org/10.1162/desi_a_00708.

Ruberg, Bo (2022), ‘Hungry Holes and Insatiable Balls: Video Games, Queer Mechanics, and the Limits of Design’, *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 61:3.

Schön, Donald (1991), *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Aldershot: Ashgate.

Swalwell, Melanie (ed.) (2021), *Game History and the Local*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

Takahashi, Keita (2018), *Katamari Damacy REROLL*, n.p.: Bandai-Namco, https://store.steampowered.com/app/848350/Katamari_Damacy_REROLL/. Accessed 2 April 2024.

Waern, Annika (2013), ‘Game Analysis as a Signature Pedagogy of Game Studies’, Chania, Greece: FDG, pp. 275–82, http://www.fdg2013.org/program/papers/paper36_waern.pdf.

Weiller, Thais Arrias (2021), ‘Teaching People What They Already Know. Designing Game Design Courses’, *Gamevironments*, 5, https://doi.org/10.48783/gameviron.v15i15.158. Accessed 3 January 2023.

Westecott, Emma (2020), ‘Game sketching: Exploring approaches to research-creation for games’, *Virtual Creativity*, 10:1, https://doi.org/10.1386/vcr_00014_1.

Zagal, José P. and Bruckman, Amy (2008), ‘Novices, Gamers, and Scholars: Exploring the Challenges of Teaching About Games’, *Game Studies*, 8:2, http://gamestudies.org/0802/articles/zagal_bruckman. Accessed 13 November 2019.

Zagal, José P. (2010), *Ludoliteracy: Defining, Understanding, and Supporting Games Education*, LaVergne: ETC Press.

Zagal, José P. (2012), ‘Why a Game Canon for Game Studies Education Is Wrong’ (eds J. Fromme and A. Unger), in J. Fromme and A. Unger (eds), *Computer Games and New Media Cultures: A Handbook of Digital Games Studies*, Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, pp. 665–77, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-2777-9_42. Accessed 21 June 2023.

[1] International’ is the term used in the UK to refer to students from overseas, i.e., students who moved to the UK for educational purposes.