

Mechanics of Making Meaning: Multimodal Pedagogy for Films and Games

Two educators in Australia studied a classroom in which the teacher and students applied a critical lens to digital texts.

A bell rings to signify the end of lunch. On cue, twenty-seven Australian teens trudge toward their classroom. Upbeat music reverberates from the door, cutting above the chattering of the group. The first students to enter the room carry puzzled expressions on their faces. These looks turn to shock as they realize their English teacher is clicking through the main menu of a videogame. “What are you doing?” asks a student, performing a double take. “Setting up our lesson. Our text today is a videogame,” their teacher replies with a smile.

Whether through the transient worlds of *TikTok* and *Instagram* or the longer-form structures of films and videogames, many students are actively engaged in an expanded media landscape that is often under-represented in the English curriculum. Brady Nash highlights research that shows a change in students’ understanding of how meaning functions across modes and through media, notably “shifting ideas about what forms of communication, and even what students, could be accepted in schools” (349). A recent literature review by Nicole Mirra and Antero Garcia found that a growing body of scholarship situates digitally mediated composition as evidence of how students make meaning across multiple textual forms (488).

We argue that we must broaden the scope of English to better reflect today’s extensive textual landscape. In doing so, English teachers can focus on how composers use form to shape meaning, how art can reflect and change the nature of our society, and how

we can apply a critical lens to multimodal and digital texts. In this article, we explore the relationship between form and meaning by sharing how teachers and students in a year 10 classroom in Sydney used films and games as part of multimodal learning and meaning-making. Through the unit, students had the opportunity to engage with multimodal forms while also meeting the requirements of New South Wales Education Standards Authority’s English outcomes. We consider these questions: How can teachers’ pedagogy support students’ understanding and creation of films as multimodal texts? And how can the study of videogame mechanics encourage students to envisage videogames as sophisticated multimodal texts?

INCORPORATING MULTIMODAL TEXTS IN THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM

Contemporary research suggests that it is critical that youth authentically engage with a range of multimodal literacies (Mills 42). The process of constructing and analyzing multimodal texts involves understanding the presence, absence, and co-occurrence of alphabetic print with visual, aural, tactile, gestural, and spatial modes (Curwood and Gibbons 60). In the secondary English curriculum in Australia, “digital texts, including film, media, and multimedia,” are valued alongside print texts (New South Wales Education Standards Authority 26), yet teachers, whose formal education and

experiences have likely privileged print texts, may struggle to scaffold and evaluate meaning-making processes that involve diverse modes of representation (Curwood 232).

In New South Wales, Australia's most populous state, the English curriculum has recently shifted to prioritize multimodal assessment. In years 11 and 12, which encompass stage 6 in the state curriculum, students must now complete one assessment task in which they demonstrate "knowledge, understanding, and skills across all of the modes" (New South Wales Education Standards Authority). The New South Wales Education Standards Authority defines these modes as reading, writing, listening, speaking, viewing, and representing. Due to the new focus on multimodal assessment, schools are now working to

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embed more multimodal composition and analysis within the English classroom in years 7 to 10. In practice, the high-stakes nature of standardized formal assessments has often hindered teachers and students from engaging fully with the scope of multimodal composition. Why should teachers take the risk of creating an imaginative film or video essay when they are able to stick with the tried-and-tested presentation accompanied by a slideshow instead? To challenge these tendencies, we need to reframe what is valued in the English classroom.

Prior research has considered ways to integrate multimodal texts, especially films, into classrooms to support students' meaning-making. Australian literacy researcher Kathy Mills argues that "encoded language and literacies are predominately multimodal" (25), yet multimodal texts, including videogames, are often underrepresented in secondary English classrooms. The new focus on multimodal assessment in New South Wales's high schools offers English teachers the opportunity to introduce new texts into the English curriculum and critically consider how their pedagogy can account for meaning-making within multimodal forms.

UNDERSTANDING MULTIMODAL LITERACIES

Multimodal literacies are critically important as students engage with texts that communicate through textual, aural, linguistic, spatial, and visual modes. Multimodal literacies are significant both because of the ways they make meaning across a variety of modes and because of the ways with which they can leverage form to create new meanings. Andrew Burn's notion of the kineikonic mode guided our approach in incorporating films and games into secondary English. The kineikonic mode focuses on the moving image and emphasizes "spatial and temporal dimensions" (Burn 41).

If students are to authentically engage with multimodal texts, they need to be taught a "multimodal theory of the moving image" (Burn 22) that emphasizes the creation of meaning across a "multiplicity of literacies" (Gee 14). When applied to the study of film and videogames, this theory justifies approaches that look beyond the shot or frame (Burn and Parker 24) and encourage the analysis of film and videogames in relation to the temporality inherent within film editing and the ludic elements of player agency and multilinear storytelling in games (Ehret et al. 342).

While Australian high school students are required to study multimodal texts, they are rarely given opportunities to investigate precisely *how* these texts make meaning. In other words, the focus is often on characters and themes rather than craft and mechanics. Films and games share the same problem in that neither medium is perceived as an intrinsically literary form, and therefore, students are unlikely to have had classroom experiences that supported detailed analyses of the multimodal literacies these texts rely on in meaning-making.

Much of the existing research on teaching film explores how best to draw thematic meaning and conceptual knowledge out of a narrative film. The multimodal elements of film may be used as a point of engagement, but they are rarely treated with the same respect as the more traditional modes of meaning that films leverage to tell stories. Some studies, like Paul Thomas and Åse Røthing's, have used films

as points of entry through which students can learn about concepts such as feminism, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism (250). Other scholars, such as Michael Anderson and Miranda Jefferson, have gone further, drawing links between a film's conceptual focus and aspects of film form. Film production, including conceptualization and editing, is a means of multimodal composition through which students can bring their understanding of film to life, in much the same way that we pair literary analysis with the practice of creative writing.

While researchers have trended toward embracing film as a multimodal text, there have been fewer studies that explore videogames through the same lens. Much of the research into videogame learning explores their utility as a tool for classroom engagement. For example, William Watson and colleagues used games to teach about the Second World War (466), and research that Gerard Altura and Jen Scott Curwood conducted found that this increase in classroom engagement was matched with an increase in academic performance (27). While characters, settings, and themes can be analyzed in both films and games, there is a unique opportunity to examine how games as a multimodal form can express meaning through game features and mechanics.

FOCUSING ON AN AUSTRALIAN CLASSROOM

Drawing on the sociocultural elements of film and videogame production and consumption, this study investigated their integration within a year 10 English class at a coeducational government high school in Sydney. Jack worked with the classroom English teacher, Mr. Williams (names are pseudonyms), to construct and teach a short unit of study focused on films and videogames. While multimodal texts intrinsically rely on an interplay of modes, this unit sought to emphasize the meaning-making processes students use when engaging in multimodal analysis. Over three weeks, students learned about montage theory before responding to and composing short film sequences, and subsequently learned about videogame mechanics before engaging in self-directed analysis of a range of videogames. Here we

will focus on case studies of five students—Yazmin, Charlotte, James, Arlo, and Russell.

We used Sharan Merriam and Elizabeth Tisdell's framework for classroom observation to explore the nature of classroom pedagogy within the implementation of this unit of work. We collected artifacts, including short montages made by students; analyses of videogame mechanics; lesson plans; semi-structured interviews with student participants and the classroom teacher; observations of classroom activities; and video recordings of lessons. Guided by thematic approaches to coding data outlined by Johnny Saldaña, we created codes to capture the diverse nature of this study, developing a range of key themes through which to address the pedagogical, sociocultural, and multimodal elements across the data sources.

MAKING MEANING

We are interested in how teachers' pedagogy can support students' understanding and creation of films as multimodal texts, as well as how the study of videogame mechanics might encourage students to see videogames as sophisticated multimodal texts. We found that learning about the history of films and games, and then analyzing selected examples through montage theory and game mechanics, respectively, enabled students to critically engage with these multimodal textual forms. Students demonstrated an adept appreciation of how films rely on montage for meaning-making, applying this understanding in their creation of brief film analyses and compositions. Subsequently, after learning how games can create meaning through their mechanics, students leveraged this knowledge in a range of in-class activities explicitly linking videogame meaning to form.

INTRODUCING MONTAGE THEORY

Montage theory emphasizes how connected images within a film can form complex ideas. Teachers and students immersed in montage-based film learning gained confidence in utilizing the metalanguage of film studies to teach and demonstrate sophisticated understandings of how films make meaning.

Students began the unit by learning about the invention of the motion-picture camera, studying the development of film form from *L'arrivée d'un train à La Ciotat* (1896) by Auguste and Louis Lumière through to Sergei Eisenstein's and Lev Kuleshov's experimentations with montage theory in the 1920s.

In their first task, students responded to an excerpt from the 1964 television program "A Talk with Hitchcock" using a short cinematic montage included in the interview to support the creation of their own definitions of montage theory. Many students quickly appreciated that montage theory focuses less on the individual shots and more on how a scene works as a whole. Introductory lessons were framed from this perspective, and Mr. Williams emphasized the ways that cinema leverages a multiplicity of modes in meaning-making. Later, students applied these theories to an analysis of the opening sequence in *Up*, an animated film from 2009 about an aging widower trying to fulfill a childhood dream. In her written work on the scene, Charlotte considered where meaning was created in the relationship between shots, rather than directly through shot composition:

In *Up*, the use of montage creates emotion and a sense that we as the audience have known the characters for their whole life. The use of repetition of events and places, things like the hill and the church and the blue balloon and the tie, all add meaning to the piece because they are constants when everything else changes.

Other students explored the emotional implications of changes to lighting and composition; for example, Arlo noted how a shift from a bright and busy environment to a darker, emptier one "connects the audience's emotions to the characters."

After Mr. Williams modeled simple film analysis, students began experimenting with composition. They worked in groups to assemble

three images in a sequence, providing an explanation of how meaning would be created through the relationship between the images and forming the basis for more complex filmmaking in subsequent units. The class began by creating a simple shot-reverse-shot sequence. First, the groups selected one image to introduce the sequence. With their second image, they introduced a new character, object, or environment that presented conflict or contrast to the first image. Finally, the students resolved the tension created between the two images, using a third image to represent the change in dynamics from Shot A to Shot C. The montages showed a sophisticated blend of creative expression and multimodal analysis; with only three images, the groups were able to create cohesive stories across a range of genres. (See Figure 1.)

Montage-based film analysis offered students a new perspective on understanding, conceptualizing, and interrogating the temporal nature of the meaning-making inherent in film. James explained that English students usually view films "like they are novels and try to pull them apart, we talk about

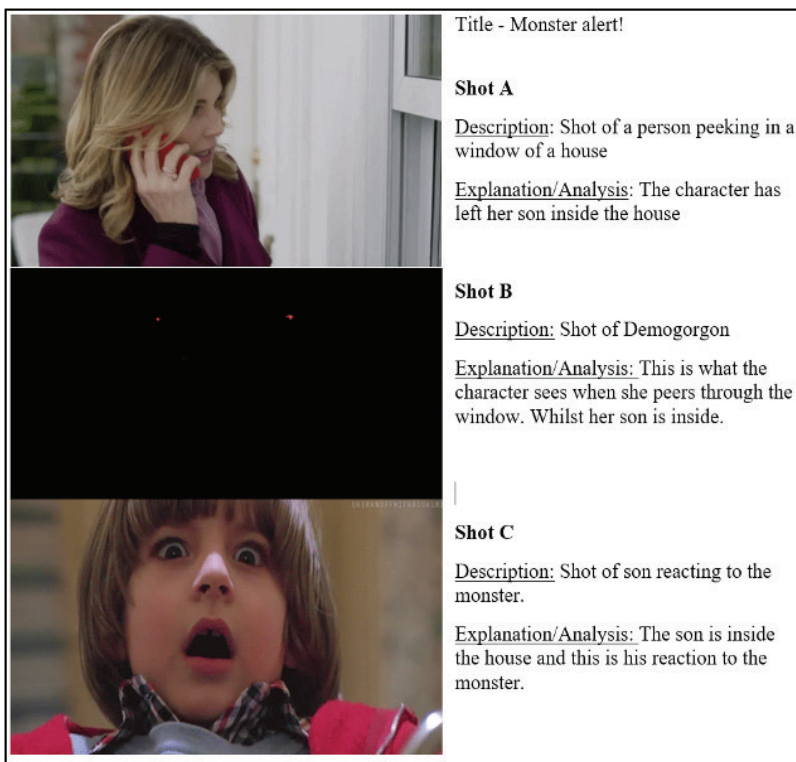


FIGURE 1

Charlotte created an image montage in a shot-reverse-shot format.

film techniques and individual pieces rather than the whole.”

Charlotte shared, “Once you told us what montage theory was, I found it much easier to look at films. It is actually really obvious that we don’t look at individual images when we watch movies, it makes much more sense.” Notably, the students benefited from their engagement with discipline-specific metalanguage. In developing knowledge of form-specific concepts, they were able to appreciate how texts make meaning in an intuitive manner.

LOOKING AT MECHANICS

Following the study of film, the videogames section of the unit began with Mr. Williams delving into the rise of the videogame industry and introducing students who were not familiar with games to the history and intricacies of the medium. In their introductory lesson on videogames, students watched video excerpts of *Pong*, *Super Mario Brothers*, and *Wolfenstein 3D*. A small group of students commented on how “basic” and “boring” these games appeared in comparison to the videogames they play now. In response, Jack simplified ludic theory, explaining how such games have very few mechanics and that contemporary videogames rely on hundreds of interrelated mechanics embedded within their systems and objectives.

As students developed proficiency in their investigation of videogame mechanics, they became more equipped to conceptualize videogames as sophisticated multimodal texts. For instance, students interrogated historically significant texts and developed knowledge of videogame metalanguage by determining what the core mechanic of each game was. Students quickly noticed the link between objectives and mechanics, and between mechanics and genres. Arlo noted, “In *Mario* you have to move across the level, so it has mechanics about moving,” in doing so explaining to the class how a game genre was designed to engage players. After this lesson, Mr. Williams revealed that while he had played videogames he had not “really thought deeply about mechanics before” and found the emphasis on mechanics a useful way to formalize videogame study in the English classroom.

Once students were comfortable describing simple mechanics, videogame lessons moved on to the study of *Papers, Please*, a serious two-dimensional puzzle simulation videogame aimed at a wide audience of gamers. Students were immersed in the game’s premise, taking turns to play the role of a customs officer working in a fictional Soviet state during the Cold War. In his interview, James described the initial response of the class, detailing how “a lot of the people in that room, who were very doubtful of the idea of a videogame being a text, shut up as soon as they saw *Papers, Please*.” Students were particularly captivated by “the moral implications of your decision making” in the game, as James expressed.

When a character seeking entry into the country did not possess the correct paperwork, the player was able to allow the character into the country at their discretion, potentially suffering personal consequences that were enforced through the game’s mechanics.

Some students were able to make explicit links between specific mechanics and the moments of game-play they created. Yazmin noted that “the core mechanic in this game is the ‘inspect’ function. It allows the player to inspect data on separate documents in the game and see whether they have matching data.” Throughout the unit, students became more confident in clearly articulating the link between mechanics and meaning in the game, as Yazmin shared:

The “spot the difference” element of the game; comparing people’s passports to their visa applications as well as to what they look like in order to find discrepancies, gives you a sense of power—you can decide the fate of that person. Your decisions affect whether an individual passed into your country or not and whether you choose to arrest them or not.

Charlotte explained that the mechanics in *Papers, Please* set forth “a moral dilemma between letting people get into a country and having your family

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punished.” She articulated how the “mechanics in games let you make moral decisions,” noting the relationship between the emotion and meaning we can draw from a videogame and the multimodal processes intrinsic to the creation of that meaning. Notably, the films and games selected for this unit were intentionally not thematically linked, but rather chosen for their potential for students to apply theory and analyze the interrelationships between multimodality and meaning, with many students focusing on emotion and affect.


Interestingly, students struggled far less with the metalanguage of videogame theory in comparison with their study of film and montage theory. We believe that the dual study of films and games was beneficial and that the students’ engagement with films and montage theory was an important prerequisite for engagement with more complex multimodal texts such as videogames. Russell expanded on this idea, suggesting that “a videogame is like a film where you can change the story, so you need to ‘get’ films before you get games.”

Students commented on this link between film and videogame analysis. James argued that pausing at specific moments in a film before leading classroom discussion was effective and that “doing the same thing for videogames is actually really enjoyable . . . because you could go through and explain those mechanics” in detail as a student encountered them during gameplay. Yazmin expressed that the close-playing lesson helped her understand how and why “games were meant to hook you in as you play them.” Mr. Williams agreed, sharing how learning about mechanics enabled “a tangible structural understanding” of videogame form.

CONSIDERING FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Critical engagement with the metalanguage of multimodal analysis enables students to demonstrate sophistication in their responses to, and compositions of, multimodal texts. Engagement with the discipline-specific concepts of cinematic montage theory and videogame mechanics assisted students to contextualize their knowledge of films and

videogames within a wider canon of multimodal literacies. This study built on sociocultural theories of learning, embedding the knowledge of film studies and game studies within a unit fostering opportunities for multimodal engagement within the secondary English classroom. While reflecting on the unit, students expressed how it reframed their understanding of films and videogames using a range of pedagogical strategies to support student engagement.

Teachers in Australia and around the world face the challenge of how to make English meaningful and relevant, while at the same time academically sophisticated. This study expands on current research and argues that English teachers need to situate films and games as legitimate multimodal texts within the rapidly shifting media landscape. 

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Students are introduced to the vocabulary of film as they go through the process of creating a short original film. This unit provides instruction on key aspects of digital filmmaking: plotting, script, storyboarding, camera work (shots, angles), and editing (transitions, title, credits, visual effects, sound effects, etc.). Once students are familiar with the techniques and terms introduced in this lesson, they can apply their new skills to bring other content areas to life through filmmaking. <https://bit.ly/3Wkptok>