

## Poets, skaters and avatars – performance, identity and new media

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*ABSTRACT: This article takes a look at two kinds of new media used within English and sister subjects: digital video and computer games. It argues that the kinds of text made by young people with these media require us to attend more urgently to the range of signifying modes they combine, where language may or may not be the dominant mode. It also argues that this kind of work often also involves a dramatic dimension, in which the work of representing the world and the preoccupations of these young authors is conducted through various kinds of physical performance, which integrate with the digital media they use. Finally, it proposes that, while such work requires a more generous view of the business of English, it also requires traditional models of media education to expand their views of representation, media and cultural engagement.*

*KEYWORDS: Media, multimodality, digital video, computer games, performance, special education.*

### INTRODUCTION

Here are three challenges for English, which, at least from my point of view, are posed by new media and the developing pedagogies associated with them.

Firstly, to be tugged away from the mode of language as the supreme and defining communicative form, the paradigm all others must follow, the master code to which all others are slave, the anchor saving other signifying systems from floating away in the wind. If we teach a film in English (as prescribed national curricula in many countries increasingly require), language is only one of the many communicative systems in play. A model of “English” that could reasonably be argued is one which specialises in *signification* – in the making of meanings in many modes, and in how those modes integrate, from the illuminated manuscript to the computer game. Allan Luke, in his keynote address to the IFTE conference in Melbourne this year, asked delegates to decide what it is, as professionals, they profess? There are many possible answers to this; but one of my preferred ones would be that we profess an expertise in signification.

Secondly, to embrace a different idea of how texts are in the world – the political economy of their production and consumption, the cultural patterns which form their genres and conventions, the plastic adaptivity of the broad signifying practices they deploy to represent the world, its ideas, stories, fantasies. Again, while new media such as web designs or the *Lord of the Rings* on Gameboy Advance may give new currency to such questions, this is not simply a question of the political economy of contemporary media. It is also a historical question which applies to the way in which a song like “The Handweaver and the Factory Maid” emerged from the industrial revolution, survived in an increasingly urban oral tradition, and was reclaimed and transformed by a mid-twentieth century English folk revival which also functioned as

an independent branch of the recording industry (<http://www.informatik.uni-hamburg.de/~zierke/martin.carthy/songs/thehandweaverandthefactorymaid.html>).

Thirdly, to move away from the idea of signification as an abstract practice, free from the taint of the material, when one is obliged to do a deal with the mess of ink or pixels in order to allow the language to assume corporeal shape. Instead, to recognise the material substance of signification as central to the act of meaning-making. This is an argument at one level for the importance of choosing between felt-tip and pencil crayon; but in the end, it is an argument about the power of technologies as the apparatuses of signification. Computers are not simply a convenient, transparent vehicle for delivering the curriculum, including literacy. They materially change, and allow us to materially change, the act of making meaning, our ability to edit, to make new texts we have never been able to make before, to publish and broadcast our works in ways never before available to us. Like the codex book or the scroll, they determine the very shape and behaviour of the space which frames our texts, as Usha Agarwal-Hollands and Richard Andrews have argued (2001). It is fair to say, perhaps, that the movement for media education has grappled with these problems more willingly and far-sightedly than English over, say, the last ten years, at least in the UK. In this article, I want to examine four examples of work which, in one way or another, represent aspects of media education, but are also closely related to English.

The examples illustrate two kinds of diversity. Most obviously, they represent different kinds of text. However, as I hope to show, they also illustrate the kinds of diversity to be found *within* a text, the diversity of modes and media which Kress and van Leeuwen call multimodality (2000). This theory, from which I have drawn many of the ideas about modes and media in this article, proposes a bold redrawing of the landscape of contemporary communication, with an increasing shift towards visual design, and towards increasingly complex combinations of textual media, often synthesised and transformed in digital formats.

Finally, I want to think about how, in all of these texts, there is a kind of performance by the students – how they all contain something of the dramatic. My intention here is to sidestep a little the unifying metaphor which has dominated debates about textuality in recent years – the literacy metaphor. I do not reject the value of this debate. Though it is controversial, I think it has offered the best way to talk about English as being about the business of signification, or semiotics, while strategically harnessing this to the traditional preoccupation of English with reading and writing.

But there are limiting features of the literacy analogy, quite apart from the prominence it confers on language, even in the effort to assert the importance of other communicative modes. Literacy is a curiously disembodied practice – it proposes an abstract system of communication with little attention to the physical drama of meaning-making, or to the kinds of role-play that text-making often involves. These limiting features extend also to the idea of “media literacy”. Dominated by policy preoccupations with the dangers of the mass media and the “need” to protect future citizens from these, and by a history of ideology theory equally preoccupied with the dangers of dominant ideologies, media education has recently begun to emerge into a greater sense of the creative agency of young people in their engagement with popular culture, as David Buckingham argues in his wide-ranging overview of media education (2003).

Yet still there are blind spots. Media educators are comfortable with rhetorics of the technical apparatuses of production, and with the conceptual apparatus of text, institution and audience. They are less happy with the close relationship between media texts and drama. Media theory is not good at explaining how the signifying properties of continuity editing, or computer game narrative, are complemented by the conventions of dramatic action, the human voice, the affective charge of dramatic expression. Conversely, drama theorists are traditionally not good at thinking about the structures of the mass media, and the fact that most drama students' experience is mediated by film and television, as Raymond Williams, in his role as Professor of Drama at Cambridge, once observed (1974/1983).

More recently, forms of mediated dramatic display have been transformed to offer audiences opportunities for dramatic engagement, in certain genres of computer game, most obviously role-playing games and other avatar-based adventure games. The idea of games as a dramatic form has been around for a while (Laurel, 1991; Murray, 1997). However, though researchers such as Beavis (2001) and McClay (2002) have considered the implications for literacy of games, their significance for drama in schools has not been extensively explored, other than an extremely helpful and wide-ranging recent article by John Carroll (2002). This makes some productive suggestions about how notions of role in educational drama could be aligned with role-play in games, such as the process drama practice of developing enacted role in tandem with out-of-role reflection.

So, rather than the literacy analogy as a unifying metaphor, I will explore performance as an underpinning theme, a way to regard textual diversity. My argument is that, in poetry, in the moving image, in computer games – the forms of text considered here – there is a sense in which performance is the link between the social motivation which inspires the making of the text, and the modes and media which enact the making.

## **SKATERS**

The first example comes from a Media Studies class I taught three years ago, working. Three 16 year-old boys, Ed, Kenny and Sammy, are making a short film as a coursework task, which requires them to study sports television as part of their work towards the GCSE, the UK public examination at 16. We have studied sports documentaries, and they have decided to make a film about skateboarding. The film is dutiful – they display an acute understanding of the genre, from its structure to its finer stylistic features. But it is also subversive – skateboarding is a part of global teenage culture which involves spectacular forms of display, territorial contestation, complex subcultural dress and language codes. It didn't seem to be about drama or performance in any obvious way; I certainly saw it as a classic media studies activity, in which the important learning was to do with genres, institutions, and the making of the moving image through filming and digital editing.

As the students began filming, however, it was clear (at least to me, retrospectively) that what was being filmed was a kind of performance – in two senses. The two boys in their year group who were the subjects of their documentary were being called on to perform their art, as they performed it every day, in a public space outside a

university building in Cambridge. In this sense, they were performing an aspect of their identity which was, at that moment, critically important to who they were, how they saw themselves and how they were perceived by their peers. One of them, Leo, talks in the documentary about his love for skating, the hours he spends practising tricks and the feeling he gets when they work. He has not been skating for long, in spite of his skill and reputation in his year group, so this, like all aspects of teenage identity, owes part of its excitement to novelty and rapid change. The sociologist Erving Goffman, in his classic study of how we perform our social roles in daily, routine dramatised forms, quotes Sartre to capture the



Figure 1. Screengrabs from the skateboarding movie

difference between the performances of the young and the adult. Sartre, watching a waiter in a cafe, is puzzled by the man's odd behaviour, until he realises that the waiter is performing – performing the role of waiter.

The game is a kind of marking out and investigation. The child plays with his body in order to explore it, to take inventory of it; the waiter in the cafe plays with his condition in order to realize it (Sartre, cited in Goffman, 1959, p. 82).

The skaters are involved in a performance which is cultural, theatrical and embodied. When Leo says, “it feels so nice” to get a trick right, we can imagine this feeling as a blend of cultural pleasure and physical sensation. However, on this particular occasion, the performance is different. The shots in the film show that the tricks are set up, perhaps repeated, so that the planned film can linger on close-ups of the skaters' legs and the board. This is not quite the performance of self Goffman

imagines; rather, it is a rehearsed version of that performance. It is a knowing, camera-aware display.

The skaters and the film-makers collaborate to construct this display, through bodily action and through camera and editing, as a hero-tribute. Its representational effort is invested in the making of a teenage hero, Leo. Halfway through the filming, however, something unexpected happens – an elderly man emerges from the university building and tells the skaters to go away. The boy filming immediately becomes aware of this departure from the script, and its dramatic potential, and the camera zooms in as close as possible on the old man. In the final film, the editing compensates for the fact that they can't get as close as they'd like – to aggrandize the figure of the old man and his significance in the unfolding drama, they superimpose large red text saying "Enter Old Man", and, later, "Old Man Gives Up".

So, there's another shift in the kind of performance going on. This is no longer a rehearsed version of an everyday performance, but an unrehearsed actual event. The script is now no longer the one agreed by the filmmakers and the skaters, but the unwritten script of a generic generational conflict and territorial contestation. As Goffman points out, such performances are routinized, and in that sense rehearsed; but the interest and excitement comes from the variations on the theme, and the improvisatory flair required for authoritative command on the one hand and defiant retort on the other.

Both sides, in this cultural battle, are improvising here, working around well-known roles. There has been rehearsal here, too – the rehearsal of everyday life. But there's a difference. The role acted out by the old man is an adult role – there's no sense that he's trying something out, experimenting, living dangerously. This is a role that has hardened with wear, ossified into a habit, resistant to change. Like Sartre's waiter, he's practising his role to realize it. The teenagers, on the other hand, are improvising in a different way, trying out bits and pieces of the stuff of identity. Leo has only been skating for a few months, and is already the hero of his year group. Like the daemons in Philip Pullman's novels, the identity-shapes of the children change all the time, while those of the adult have become fixed. Like Sartre's child, Leo plays with his body to explore, to take inventory.

Perhaps the really interesting thing here is how the moving image and the performance combine. There are many ways in which the modes of the moving image complement, enhance, amplify, rework the messages about skating and identity that the skaters are presenting through action, word, dress and the occupation of the built environment. The filmmakers use rapid cutting, cutting on the beat of the music track, black and white colour, a thrash metal music track, and a variety of other devices to signify excitement, skill and the coolness of the skaters. But it's easy to overlook the apparently simple, but critical act of framing. By the close-ups on the skateboard, the master shots of the space, the panning and tracking shots that follow the movement of the skateboard, the camera gains its distinction from theatrical performance. It operates as proxy audience, inserting us into the space of the drama, point of view, but more than that – invisible participant. Nowhere is this more true than in the moment when the old man appears. The camera catches him, then reframes to include both Leo and him – instantly protagonist and antagonist; then zooms in to amplify him as villain of the piece. This is unrehearsed, improvisatory drama, certainly – but the

improvisatory work of the camera is as much an actor in it as the skaters and the old man.

David Parker and I have employed the term *kineikonic* (literally, move + image) for this mode of the moving image, and we have applied it to an extended discussion of the skateboarding film (Burn & Parker, 2003). We wanted to use it partly to get away from the usual terms associated with cinema (cinematic; filmic). But we also want to use it to suggest a new idea of how the moving image works as a multimodal, integrative system of signification. In this system, the signifying properties of filming and editing work in combination with the other modes that contribute to the piece. In this short film, the performance of the skaters, the serendipitous intervention of the old man, the modes of action and speech they employ, are pulled into the camera frame and the edited sequence by the film-makers, and integrated with the modes of music and written text. But to see the whole thing as performative in different ways is to suggest a fluidity, dynamism and physicality in the making of the film which is not captured by conventional notions of filming and editing as sedate, contemplative activities.

As we have seen, the filming here is very much part of the performance, a physical proxy for the eye of the spectator as well as an on-the-spot editor, selecting and framing. The editing too was a dynamic activity, full of purposeful talk, pointing, and shaping of the visual and auditory sequences in the digital editing software. While it is clear that the skaters are performing aspects of their cultural and social selves, it is less obvious that the three boys making the film are also performing aspects of their social identities. By choosing this subject, by saturating it with celebratory signifiers, by framing it in appropriate generic devices, they are positioning themselves as well as their subjects. The implicit message is that, while not skaters themselves, they are located close to this culture. But their specific cultural knowledge is not so much of the act of skateboarding, but of the stylistic conventions of its media representations – this is their skill.

At the same time, they have a different motivation. While their message is in many ways one of a subversive teenage subculture, they are also ambitious high-achievers within the examination system. This is a different kind of performance, but no less dynamic – the film is at once a sharply-observed pastiche of a popular televisual style, and a demonstration of prescribed forms of media knowledge required for a high grade assessment in a Media Studies exam.

Again, the point is that the lesson has been planned and conceived by me within the received wisdom of media studies. It's about genres, institutions, technologies, which is fine; but it doesn't have a language to speak about bodies, voices and performance. So all this signifying work is left up to the students, and much of it happens at an unconscious level. This may not matter, and here it has in no way impeded the effectiveness of the work; but it risks being misunderstood, unplanned for, unrecognised, beyond the reach of the pedagogy.

## AVATARS

This second example of the relation of drama to media and new technologies comes from a drama class in a special school for children with physical disabilities in the north of England.

This is part of a Best Practice Research Scholarship, a scheme administered by the UK government's department of education to encourage action research by practitioners in the classroom. This particular project is run by the British Film Institute in collaboration with my own institution, and in this year (2002-2003) it has involved teachers in eight schools, reflecting on their own practice in digital editing with students.

This class of 12-year-olds have been working with their teacher, Bob Overton, on a drama inspired by the well-known action adventure game *Tomb Raider*. In fact, it's not really *Tomb Raider*, though that was their initial inspiration – it's a First Person Shooter, and the narrative is one of alien invasion. My account of it here is based on a day's observation at the school, and on interviews with Bob and with three of the students. Bob is writing his own research study of this project, and his focus and conclusions may well be different from mine – these arguments are my own, and I am grateful to him for his time, his ideas, and access to his work and the work of his students.

Unlike the part played by performance in the previous examples, the drama here is fully acknowledged, and privileged above the media. Bob sees digital video as a representational mechanism which can offer access to drama that these students wouldn't otherwise get. He also points out that the role of aliens is one chosen in particular by Ian, a boy who has been quadriplegic since a road accident. Bob points out that Ian always wants to be an alien because it's a way of positively using how different he looks.

[MERE OAKS VIDEO: available on html version]

While it is easy enough to see how the playing of alien roles in the film is a form of drama, it is also worth asking how the drama might be related to the video-making. Bob and his students have a history of expert use of the conventions of the moving image, including the techniques of continuity editing, so there's no question here of the camera simply being used as a recording device to capture the drama – rather, its full function as a signifying technology in its own right is exploited.

Another way to ask the question might be: "How is the drama related to the everyday roles of the students?" In this case, we would need to look at how the role-play of the aliens relates to the students playing the parts of film-makers – how Ian's point of view, as he whizzes round the school corridors in his wheelchair filming the shots, is related to the point-of-view of the character. And how these two points-of-view are related in turn to his view of the world as a wheelchair user.

But this is also the point-of-view of a computer game character. Like FPS's in general, it's less of an avatar than a subjective camera with a gunhand attached. In the film, the students have filmed a moving gunhand against a blue screen, and superimposed it on Ian's corridor footage. What kind of role-play is this? It represents interactivity – that is, it stands for interactivity, though the text it produces is actually a simulation of interactivity – it plays us an FPS gunhand shooting down aliens, but

doesn't provide us with the control of the game, because this is technologically impossible. Like students in a course for "making computer games", part of a research project at the WAC Performing Arts and Media college in London, the students can make videos that look like computer games, but can't make the games themselves (Willett, 2002).

In this case, however, the act of making the video, as with the boy who filmed the old man in the skaters video, seems closely connected with the drama. The action of propelling a wheelchair, controlled by a chin-operated joypad, around the corridors with a camera attached to the arm of the chair, is so much like the act of playing a computer game that the act of representation and the subject of that representation are intricately connected. The roles played by Ian here are, maybe, three quite distinct but related ones: the role of the alien Zarg in the narrative; the role of the first-person shooter in the game; and the role of camera-operator in the production process the class are engaged in under Bob's supervision. And all three roles are in turn connected to, even determined by, the self which Ian has to perform every day, and the technology which enables him to perform it.

These relationships between performance, filming and representation are not vague ones – they play out quite specifically in the structures of the video. As Bob points out, the decision about where to attach a camera to Ian's wheelchair is critical, since it is a decision about a camera angle to be filmed by a camera-operator who only ever sees the world from the same angle. The point-of-view from the arm of the wheelchair, which is where this is filmed from, is one that Ian himself can never adopt.

The making of the film shows the multimodal process and its attendant technologies very clearly. As well as Ian's filming, there is music, composed on a music software package by another student, and tested against the rhythm of the video edit by simply playing the two computers simultaneously, with Bob orchestrating the event like a multimedia conductor. There is also speech. Again, this is typical of Bob's refusal to allow specific sensory limitations of his students to prevent them from deploying modes of communication – the speech is created by a student who cannot himself speak, typing the script on screen and selecting from a menu of synthesised voices. Like Ian's wheelchair, this is not simply a technology for producing speech for the film, but typical of the technologies used to produce speech in everyday life for students with speech impairment.

Bob's insistent point, however, is that this is not English, media education or technology, but drama. His central purpose in using digital video is one of access to drama for students who can never occupy a conventional stage. So, as well as the technologies of video editing (on i-movie), filming and sound editing, there are the technologies of costume (alien breastplates and weapons) and dramatic action. The video allows dramatic shaping of the action, editing out the movements that don't work, the hesitations, the long pauses. The slow, painful effort of movement and communication caused by profound disability is edited into the fast-paced, fluid world of the First Person Shooter. The students recreate themselves as their own avatars in the video.

In terms of performance, then, we can see this in two ways. Firstly, it is a piece of devised theatre, in which Bob and his students adopt the kinds of negotiated practice



which educational drama develops from such advocates of drama as social empowerment as Augusto Boal (1979). As in Boal's notion of forum theatre, these students occupy a space which previously would have consigned them to the role of audience only. The stage which was physically barred to them is opened up by Bob's determination and by the technologies of DV. The dramatic space of the moving image is inhabited by them; and the role and point-of-view of the computer game is constructed by them. So this is not only an inversion of the usual power relations of theatre, offering the opportunity to the students to make drama out of their own preoccupations and cultural tastes. It is also a use of representational technologies to invert the power relation in which theatre, as a physical art, is denied to those with physical disability as a possible mode of expression.

Secondly, as with the boys who made the skateboarding film, these students occupy the social roles of film-makers. This is not their first experience – they have worked on DV before with Bob, and Ian's reply in interview to my question about whether he had filmed before is an assured, "Many times." The atmosphere of the classroom is midway between an energetic apprenticeship – with Bob and his team of assistants encouraging, urging, modelling, helping – and a busy design studio, each student with their specialised role and technology, editing, advising, composing, scripting. We often treat students as if they are amateurs; but it has often struck me while working with them in school theatre productions, and I'm reminded of it here, that they are professional too – this is their day job.

### ... MORE AVATARS

The third example comes from a group of Year 7 students playing the computer game of *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, as part of a course on games within the English curriculum, devised and taught by James Durran, an Advanced Skills Teacher at Parkside Community College in Cambridge, the first specialist media arts college in the UK.

The class are playing the game on an interactive whiteboard, with one student at the controls of the game (the PC version of it – it's a cross-platform action adventure game), and the rest of the class offering advice and instruction. For the purposes of this article, the interesting question is, in what sense is it a dramatic experience to play Harry Potter as avatar?

Firstly, like other examples given above, this is clearly an experience of the media closely associated with wider forms of cultural behaviour and identity. James taps into this early in the lesson by asking who in the class is like the three central characters of the Harry Potter stories – and sure enough, there's a girl who likes to be thought of as Hermione and a boy who's pleased about his resemblance to Ron. (Curiously, no-one wants to be Harry.) Immediately, there's a frustration here about the game, which has Harry as a solo avatar, and no opportunity to control Hermione or Ron.

Secondly, it looks as though it's girls who are the experts in playing this game. Two girls take the lead; and one has to teach a pair of boys how to play when it's their turn. Suddenly, a skill born of long hours of gaming appears as a skill legitimated in the classroom. This is an interesting moment. James points out in an interview afterwards

that in the lessons on games, there's a sharp distinction between experienced gamers and those who've never played. This calls into doubt our enthusiastic assumption, a version of the myth of the cyberkid which Buckingham warns against (2000), that all kids are equally immersed in, and competent in, digital culture. We also discuss the analogy of other cultural forms encompassed by English, such as poetry, which must similarly be familiar to some children and quite alien to others.

Thirdly, the girl playing the game shows what's now become familiar to me, which is a pronoun shift in the relation of the players to the avatar. Gerard Genette, the French narratologist, thinks of narratives as an expansion of the grammatical category of verb, which is a useful perspective for English, maybe. He proposes that narratives are basically statements, and that therefore their natural mood is the indicative; and associates this with their first and third person structure (1980).

Games, by contrast, are clearly second person texts. The early action adventure books of Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone make this clear – they address us in the second person, and, as well as offering information in the indicative mood of Genette's traditional narrative, they ask us questions and tell us to do things. Maybe the characteristic moods of the game are interrogative and imperative. Kress and van Leeuwen, in their grammar of visual design, follow Halliday in seeing these functions as *demand* functions, as opposed to the *offer* of "goods or information" represented by the indicative (1996).

So, if you're playing an avatar-based game, you are likely to see the character in third person terms, as a character presented to you by the audiovisual technologies of the game; but also as a projection of yourself, your representative in the game ("avatar" is a Sanskrit word meaning the descent of a god to earth). We might expect, then, some oscillation between third person and first person references to the character/avatar. I have looked at this elsewhere (Burn and Schott, forthcoming), in relation to teenagers playing the Japanese role-playing game *Final Fantasy 7*. The same phenomenon is apparent in James' Year 7 group. The class, looking at Harry lying unconscious in a cut scene, shout "Harry's dead!" (with a certain degree of ironic pleasure!). The third person here maybe represents the nature of cut scenes, which are not interactive parts of the game. The girl playing the game is then encouraged by the class to fire Harry's wand at Filch, the caretaker, which doesn't work, as Filch is not a designated target in the game. They then shout at her "Trample the cat!". She replies, "I can't trample the cat!"; but she makes the avatar run up to the cat, and then jump up and down (by pressing the space bar, which makes the avatar jump). She then says excitedly, "I trampled the cat!" The third person view of Harry as narrative protagonist has become the first person of the player/avatar relation.

In a research paper on online role-playing games, a colleague and I have proposed three motivations for the actions of players – representational (how players enter into the representation, narrative, dramatic structures of the game); ludic (how they engage with the rule-based systems and challenges of the game); and communal (how they engage with communities of players, both within and beyond the game) (Burn & Carr, 2003).

All three seem relevant here; but with specific features. The communal motivation, for instance, is dominated here by an unusual form of collaborative play specific to

the classroom, but informed by experiences of game-play, film and reading from outside it. The representational motivation is the one most obviously relevant to the theme of drama and performance running through this paper. This girl's excited declaration, "I trampled the cat!", looks like a pronominal identification with Harry; and certainly, in representational terms, she has inserted herself, through the avatar, into the transitivity system of the game – she has become the Actor/Subject, the cat has become the Goal/Object. However, the verb of this mini-narrative – trample – is interesting for various reasons. Firstly, it bears out an argument I have made elsewhere, that the semiotic variety of gameplay happens in spite of the necessarily restricted language of game controls. To control Harry, you can only go in the four directions controlled by the arrow keys, jump (space bar), and fire your wand. But that's not what it feels like to a skilful player – the controls melt away, as in driving a car, and you experience the action as it's meant to be in the gameworld. So she doesn't experience this action as "pressing the space bar" (the technical action), but as "trampling the cat".

The second reason why this is interesting is that this verb, trampling, is not a dramatic action the game itself has designed, or even envisages. The verb which is designed to go with the space bar is "Jump" – and it's there to get Harry over obstacles. So the class have instructed Ali to perform an action that's not actually possible within the game – it has no meaning as far as the game engine is concerned, unlike "jump". There are three likely reasons for this. Firstly, the students shouting out to her to trample the cat are possibly not aware of what can or can't be done in the game, as the ignorance of several boys of the game's controls shows at other points in the lesson. Secondly, the boys shouting this instruction are possibly transferring to this game their experience of first person shooters, in which the objective is to shoot creatures rather than to explore and uncover. This is borne out by the preceding command – "Shoot the cat!", which is changed to "Trample the cat!" when they realise that shooting doesn't work. (Harry's wand isn't designed to shoot at this point of the game, though it is at other points.) Thirdly, it's likely that this is an ironic subversion of the ethical structure of Harry Potter, as in the jubilant "Harry's dead!" cry in the cut scene. The Harry we know and love would obviously never trample a cat. This is a kind of critical discourse, arguably one which asserts some distance from the sentiment of the novels, as well as positioning itself as too old for them.

The response of the girl at the game controls is interesting too. As an experienced player of the game, she knows it's not possible to shoot or trample the cat, and she says so. But she tries anyway, and is excited to find that she produces an effect which at least looks like the cat being trampled, even if the game engine is unable to recognise this as a legitimate action.

This collaborative play, because it must be conducted through language, makes the grammar of role-play explicit. We have seen how the girl adopts the first person of the avatar, and how she invents actions which the game has not anticipated. We can also see how the "demand" mood of the gameplay works, and enacts the needs of interactivity. The game effectively says "Here's Filch and his cat – what are you going to do?"; the players (the class) respond with an imperative: "Trample the cat!"; which is translated by the girl into the command of the keyboard – literally, the keyboard command – of the space-bar. At this point, the feedback loop is broken, as

the game is not able to recognise the action as consequential; so effectively, it resorts to asking “What will you do next?”

The exchange of imperatives between collaborative players has also been observed by Gareth Schott, in an article on a group of boys playing *Soul Reaver: the Legacy of Kain* (Schott, 2002). Schott characterises the boys’ excited commands to each other in terms of Halliday’s regulatory mode of language; but notices also that the commands are expressed in relation to the keys on the Playstation joypad, rather than in relation to narrative actions or events. He concludes that the dominant interest in this session is in the technicalities (and technology) of gameplay, rather than in the narrative the game represents. In James’ lesson, the opposite seems to be true. The only time when members of the class refer to the keys is to say “Press Enter!” to skip the cut scenes. “Trample the cat!” is a clear example of an emphasis on narrative, if a subversive one. Later in the session, the class become deeply involved in the events in the game and Harry’s attempts to get through the obstacles in his path. This involvement is shown by gasps, by one boy clapping a hand over his mouth as Harry gets into trouble, and again by repeated instructions. However, whereas at the beginning of the lesson the instructions were directed at the girl playing on the computer, they are now directed at Harry himself – “Run, Harry!”

Here, then, something analogous to the pronoun shift has happened with the class. The game addresses its players in the second person, or its audiovisual equivalent; the players respond in the second person, the instruction to Harry and to Ali completely indistinguishable, thereby locating her as the “I” of the narrative, and fusing player and avatar.

From a textual point of view, we can see several ideas here which are quite new to the English curriculum. Firstly, this is a text which is about both “reading” and “writing” – it takes our rhetoric about active readership quite literally, and the collaborative players have some decisions to make about about the route through the narrative. Secondly, it is a multimodal text both like and unlike others in English. It resembles the narrative of a novel, specifically Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets. It also resembles the film, and addresses the players principally through the mode of the moving image, in the form of animation. Again, though, the player has some control, such as 365-degree control of the camera. Least obviously, the game deploys a mode not found elsewhere in the canons of English – the mode of the game system. This can be thought of as a restricted language, in the sense Halliday uses with reference to the game of contract bridge (1989). While Harry’s gameworld is replete with the audiovisual signifiers of Hogwarts, Quidditch, and the heroes and villains of the narrative, the game language may be simply the options of “Forward, Backward, Left, Right, Jump, Fire (a spell)”. How this language is articulated with the more familiar language of a kineikonic narrative is the challenge for us to understand and to explore with our students.

## POETS

The final text is a short video, made by a student in an English class I taught two years ago. We were studying a poem by Sujata Bhatt, “Search for my tongue”, as part of an anthology of texts set for the GCSE public exam in English at 16.

The poem, partly in English, partly in Gujarati, is about bilingualism and the kinds of dual identity it confers; and about the vulnerability of the bilingual tongue in diasporic communities. I asked five bilingual students to write their own poems modelled on Sujata Bhatt’s; and then to make short films of themselves performing the poems. They took a day to do this, and were taught how to film and edit their pieces, using the digital editing software Media 100.

All the films can be seen as part of a resource made by Jenny Leach and colleagues at the Open University ([www.open.ac.uk/movingwords](http://www.open.ac.uk/movingwords)). Here, however, is the film of one of the students, Fatima, whose poem is in English and Bengali.

[FATIMA VIDEO: can be viewed on [html version](#)]

In some ways this is a familiar text for English teachers – it is an art form which is part of our stock-in-trade; it deals in language and in the tropes of poetry, it represents a successful apprenticeship of these students with Sujata Bhatt. They did go on to meet her, and to show their films to her and to others at the Arts Picture house cinema in Cambridge.

In this text, it is clear that in many ways language is the dominant mode. Whereas the words are able to stand on their own, without language, the whole piece would be meaningless. However, the written words become something different in spoken performance. At one point, for instance, Fatima imagines her two tongues as “unidentical twins”, who need at times to be quietened as they clamour for attention. If they are naughty children, she assumes the role of mother, telling them, first in English, then in Bengali:

*Quiet!*  
*Cup thako!*

The exclamation mark in the written text already suggests dramatic dialogue, role-play in language. In the spoken form, the thin approximation of the punctuation is replaced by the fully intonational significance of a stern voice, using raised volume and a decisive falling tone.

As well as the signifying properties of speech, the poem uses the kineikonic mode to frame and shape the performance. Most obviously, Fatima films the poem from two angles, to represent the two languages. These are separated by cuts, so that the two languages are separated throughout the film by a sharp demarcation in the edit, as well as being represented as sharply separate in the words of the poem:

*My life is split into two pieces*  
*Like a fruit that has been cut into two halves.*

In the short extract given above, she films and edits the English word in close-up, showing her full face, so that a small frown which complements her parental sternness

with the recalcitrant tongues can be seen. The Bengali phrase, however, is filmed in extreme close-up, so that only her mouth is framed by the camera, producing an emphasis on the mouth as an organ of speech, perhaps, but also a sense that the Bengali is more intimately represented than the English.

Like the skateboarders, Fatima is constructing a performance of self, and of intimate aspects of selfhood and language. Like the makers of the skating film, she is using the kineikonic mode – the systematic affordances of filming and editing in combination with the other modes at work here – language (specifically as poetry); speech; the built environment (she films against a brick wall).

For English, though this is, of all the pieces considered here, a traditional kind of English text, it raises all kinds of problems for the conventional structures and assessment mechanisms of English. Should it be assessed, for instance, as reading or writing (two separately assessed areas of the UK curriculum)? How do we assess its nature as an oral performance? The “Speaking and Listening” part of the curriculum is more to do with debate and chairing meetings than about the finer points of spoken language and its performance. And as for the elements of the moving image – this is consigned to the “Reading” section of the curriculum in the UK, so you get no marks for being able to “write” it. In short, this is a complex multimodal text which a monomodal curriculum and assessment model is completely unable to do justice to.

## **CONCLUSION: MULTIMODAL PERFORMANCES**

Though they are very different, these three examples have some important things in common.

They are all texts which involve language, but in which language has very different places, importances and functions. In Fatima’s poem, it is central and indispensable; in the skating video, it is marginal and highly specialised in its use. In the aliens video, it forms a vital part of the introductory sequence, setting the scene and helping to establish the genre.

They are all texts which use the moving image, though the variety of uses shows the ways in which our settled notions of film as a well-known series of film and television dramas needs to be urgently expanded. The skateboarding film is perhaps the most familiar, with its echoes of sports documentary and tribute genres, and certain forms of “youth television”. The computer game uses animation in a specific way, displaying characters and landscapes responsive to player intervention. While some aspects of this kind of moving image are familiar – the camera angle is completely variable for the player – others are not. (There are, in the gameplay sequences, no cuts, for instance. The whole sequence is, in effect, one long take.) And as for the poetry film – this is not a recognisable genre, really, unless as a segment of a television arts programme. It is certainly not styled as a popular genre, just as poetry is not a popular literary form.

They are all texts which make the relation between reading and writing, consumption and production, problematic. Both the skateboarding film and the poetry film are intended to show an understanding of texts the students have studied – sports

television sequences and bilingual poems, respectively. However, they are both obviously also original productions in their own right. Clearly, then, they represent processes both of interpretation *and* of production. At the same time, they raise interesting questions about the definitions of creativity we work with in schools, and in particular about the nature of the originality often promoted as an essential ingredient in the creative mix. (See, for instance, the guidelines in the UK government's policy document on creativity in education {NACCCE, 2001}.) These two texts are very clearly both imitative, in very detailed ways, and also original and creative in that they transform the tools, techniques and systems available to say something important about those that made them and their lives.

The Harry Potter game, like all interactive media, raises questions about the relationship between reading and writing. In many ways, players are positioned as audiences, reacting to an audiovisual spectacle someone else has made for them. In other ways, they are able to determine their route through the text, to determine whether the game or the narrative is more important for them by their traversal, and to inhabit the text in quite specific ways not possible with a book or a film.

These texts also raise questions for the English curriculum about the inclusion of popular forms such as computer games and popular television alongside the established elite genres of literature.

But they raise problems for media teachers too. They require a view of representation as social performance, in which the signifying properties of faces, hands, mouths, voices, cardboard, wheelchairs integrate with those of the new media, in multimodal combinations which demand an expanded vocabulary from us if we are to describe them adequately. And, by the same token, we need this expanded vocabulary if we are not to develop for our students' metalanguages which distort and limit their understandings of what they can do with this mix of bodies, voices and digital resources.

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