

## **Drawing on children's digital repertoires to enable playful digital literacies in the primary classroom**

MONKHOUSE, Jemma and BAILEY, Chris J <<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1969-5001>>

Available from Sheffield Hallam University Research Archive (SHURA) at:

<https://shura.shu.ac.uk/36138/>

---

This document is the Accepted Version [AM]

### **Citation:**

MONKHOUSE, Jemma and BAILEY, Chris J (2025). Drawing on children's digital repertoires to enable playful digital literacies in the primary classroom. In: DANIELS, Karen and HELKS, Marie, (eds.) An Introduction to Diverse Literacies in Primary Classrooms. Routledge, 137-148. [Book Section]

---

### **Copyright and re-use policy**

See <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/information.html>

## **Chapter 11. Drawing on Children's Digital Repertoires to enable Playful Digital Literacies in the Primary Classroom**

Jemma Monkhouse

<https://orcid.org/0009-0000-3789-4915>

Chris Bailey

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1969-5001>

This chapter seeks to demonstrate the value of digital play within educational settings, exploring how the integration of digital play in the classroom can tap into children's existing digital skills. The authors discuss three research projects, each focusing on different orientations of digital play in schools. These three case studies involve Key Stage 2 children, a group often overlooked in play-related discussions.

First, the 'Blogging Barnsborough' project introduces a virtual world video game to children from two schools, with both authors serving as teachers. Next, with 'The Street', Jemma collaborates with teachers and children across two school sites in a multimedia project focused on playful activities. Finally, via 'Building a Virtual Community', Chris leads an after-school Minecraft club, emphasising various digital play orientations to enhance literacy skills based on children's existing interests and digital competencies.

We conclude by suggesting that digital play in the classroom can effectively harness children's established digital repertoires, bridging the gap between classroom experiences and the children's out of school digital literacy practices.

### **Introduction- Understanding Digital Play**

In this chapter, we explore several dimensions of digital play in classroom contexts that leverage children's existing digital repertoires. We present three illustrative examples of practice arising from our past experiences as teachers and researchers.

First, we briefly explain our roles in relation to this work, to share our evolving viewpoints. Secondly, we establish the theoretical framework for the ideas and arguments outlined in this chapter. Thirdly, we guide the reader through three distinct projects that we participated in as teachers and / or researchers. Each project involves digital play situated within classrooms but drawing on skills and knowledge from elsewhere in the children's lives. This helped to blur the conventional understanding of a home / school divide existing in relation to digital literacies. Finally, we reflect on the insights gained from considering these three examples collectively, shedding light on children's literacy development in the realm of digital play and offering implications for practitioners and students alike.

We (Jemma and Chris) have both had a similar career trajectory in that we were both primary school teachers who have now moved to work in academia, largely because of our own experiences of being involved in research in our own classrooms. Jemma is a Senior Lecturer in Primary Teacher Education while Chris is a Senior Lecturer in Education Studies. Each of the examples discussed later in this chapter involves us in roles as teachers, researchers and sometimes teacher / researchers interested in digital play in and around the classroom. Each of the examples from practice is recalled giving an overview of the project,

before we revisit these in relation to this chapter's concern around school and out of school contexts. Each example has also formed the basis of other academic work, and readers interested in finding out more of the detail are encouraged to pursue the further reading in each example.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The examples in this chapter are underpinned by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. Before narrating our practical examples, we will outline each of these perspectives in turn to explain how we are thinking about these instances of digital play. Here we address core ideas around:

- a. Digital Literacies
- b. Play / Playfulness
- c. Understandings of Space

### a. Digital Literacies

While there is much work around the use of digital technologies in school contexts, it is the work specifically around digital *literacies* that provides the foundations for our thinking. Each of the three case studies outlined later in this chapter mobilise an understanding of digital literacies, informed by work around new literacies, to frame our understandings both as teachers and researchers involved in these projects. There are multiple interpretations of what is meant by the term 'Digital Literacies' (eg. Hobbs, 2010; Belshaw and Higgins, 2011) and these generally involve the creation and consumption of texts (in the broadest New Literacy Studies sense) using a device with a screen, while also taking account of the skills or competencies that are required by the individuals who interact with them.

Rather than drawing on any specific definition or framework, our own understandings of digital literacies are shaped more broadly by work around 'new literacies' (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011). Here, the 'new' is broadly synonymous with 'contemporary', while the 'literacies' involved are related to broad conceptions of reading and writing, rather than literacy used to mean 'competency'. New literacies therefore encompass the kind of digital literacy practices and events that are mediated by screen based technologies (Pahl and Rowsell, 2005) and the kind of multimodal (Kress, 2009) texts that are generated using these screens. New literacies are also broadly positioned in relation to traditional literacies as being more collaborative, distributed and participatory than other more conventional types of literacy (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011), suggesting that it is not simply the individual's relationship with the device that is significant but that digital literacies often involve a network of other factors. This could, for instance, involve collaboration with other children on a shared project (a document, a multiplayer game, etc), or the network might involve a child drawing on another cultural experience or artefact (such as a YouTube Video, or a song) to produce their own work via a process of remix.

Also important here are the concepts of multimodality and multiliteracies. Multimodal theory (Kress, 2009) suggests that communication and meaning making happen in a range of modes. While written text and speech are perhaps the main modes of communication that we associate with literacy, multimodality suggests that communication happens via modes in combination with each other, and with other modes including 'image, moving image, sound... gesture, gaze and posture' (Jewitt, 2013, p. 257). Multiliteracies (New London Group, 1996) draws on these understandings and suggests that literacies pedagogy should

reflect and take account of the complex, culturally diverse nature of multimodal communication. In this way, texts are not only written but also spoken, visual, sonic, moving as well as static, existing in physical and virtual space.

#### **Spotlight on Research: Angela Colvert and Fiona Maine**

Colvert's study is an example of work influenced by a New Literacy Studies conception of digital literacy. Here, the researcher explores the use of an Alternate Reality Game (ARG) in a primary school classroom, using a literacies lens. This work suggests that there are three key dimensions of literacy that relate to these experiences: operational; critical; and cultural.

Maine's work uses similar theories to focus on the video game 'Monument Valley' as an interactive text that provides players with a digital narrative. This research, based on close observation of play, raises questions about whether we engage with narrative games by playing them, by reading them, or both.

Colvert, A. (2020). Presenting a new hybrid model of ludic authorship: reconceptualising digital play as 'three-dimensional' literacy practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(2), 145–165.

Maine, F. (2017). The bothersome crow people and the silent princess: exploring the orientations of children as they play a digital narrative game. *Literacy*, 51(3), 138-146.

#### **b. Play / Playfulness**

Having expanded on the 'digital' aspect of 'digital play', it is important that we now address the concept of 'play' itself, given that this is also a term with multiple meanings for different readers. In this chapter we employ a broad understanding of play, drawing on the work of theorists who conceptualise play as having multiple dimensions. For Sutton-Smith (2001), for example, play can include 'exploration, practice, manipulation, mastery, experimentation, reading and listening, making music, painting, roughhousing and so on' (p. 134). Similarly, Hughes' (2013) suggests that play is 'several different things' (p. 80). As such, Hughes' (2013) taxonomy of play positions the concept as multiple and complex, naming communication, drama, movement, exploration, fantasy, imagination and mastery amongst his sixteen suggested observable play types.

The concept of play is also often conflated with the idea of playfulness. Here, the work of Caillous (2001) can be helpful. For Caillois (2001), play can be either ludic or paidic. Caillois (2001) suggests that 'ludus' is generally rule bound play, often involving practice and mastery; examples here include chess, or football. 'Paidia', however, is akin to playfulness in that it is understood as much more spontaneous, improvisational or free-form in nature. In this chapter, our examples fall much more in line with this paidic, playful understanding of play, although the reader may also note some aspects of ludic play. Play, in the context of education, is often linked to what Sutton-Smith (2001) terms 'the rhetoric of progress' (p. 51), a perspective that draws on psychologically-situated understandings of human development that position the value of play purely in terms of measurable cognitive or physical change. This can result in classrooms that more regularly feature examples of ludic play - maths games, spelling apps etc - than of playfulness or paidic play, given that rule bound, ludic play can be accommodated more easily alongside the need for accountability and the restrictions imposed by modern day curriculum and policy. However, drawing more on socio-cultural

understandings of play broadens the potential for the use of play in education, helping to make way for more open, paidic types of activity.

### Questions for Critical Reflection

- How do you understand play and / or playfulness?
- How do you see the value of play in your own practice?
- How could you make more space for play in your setting?

### c. Understanding Space

Conventional understandings of space frame space in predominantly physical (or 'material') terms. In this sense, we understand a classroom 'space' as being made up of desks, a whiteboard, display boards, windows, walls, chairs etc. These traditional ideas of space also reinforce set boundaries, by making clear delineations between what is or isn't school – anything that happens within the walls of the building is 'school', anything beyond is othered as external to school.

However, there are more complex, and potentially more useful ways of understanding space. Spatial theorists such as Massey (2005) and Lefebvre (1991) help us to conceptualise space as consisting of much more than the physical. Massey (2005) describes space as a product of interconnections, which includes material and immaterial aspects. Here, the 'material' refers to objects and devices – the 'tangible' things that can be touched and held in classrooms, such as the chairs, the laptops, the books and the physical aspects we outlined above. The immaterial, however, refers to those aspects of space which are social, or cultural, or imagined – but also just as real. In a classroom context, this might be thoughts, ideas, emotions, cultural knowledge, etc. Understanding these things as contributing to classroom space means that thoughts, ideas, knowledge and even feelings that circulate in a classroom can shape the space. Lefebvre (1991) also helps us to understand that space is socially produced, meaning that space is not as fixed as we might often consider it to be, and that it is shaped by the experiences of those who inhabit it.

This kind of understanding of space relates to this chapter's topic in two ways. Firstly, it helps us understand that children's lives are not lived in discrete, measurable spaces and that the divisions we often make – for example, between ideas of 'school' or 'home' experience - are not as fixed as we often assume. To move beyond the artificial separation of 'school' and 'out of school' as discrete sites of experience encourages us to explore how these spaces are connected by the lives lived in and between both. For example, both home and school exist in children's lives, and while the two settings are indeed different, there are also many ways in which home and school share objectives and outcomes- in relation to experience, care, learning, enjoyment, etc. As such, the boundaries between home and school are revealed to be porous, particularly in relation to the digital skills and knowledge that children build up in their lives. Understanding space as being more than physical also helps us to explore the idea of digital space, and the ways in which introducing digital space to schools changes the nature of classroom space.

## Examples of Practice

Having outlined our theoretical assumptions, we will now share, via three case studies, the examples of practice – each demonstrating different ways in which children were encouraged to draw on their digital repertoires in a classroom context. In each case, ethical consent was gained for children to be part of the research component of each of these projects. Children who did not give consent were still welcome to take part in the projects but were not a focus of the research. In each of the projects, consideration was given to the power dynamics that come into play when acting as both a teacher and a researcher.

### Case Study 1: Blogging Barnsborough

Barnsborough was the name of an onscreen 3D virtual world environment designed as a literacies opportunity for primary school children. On screen, Barnsborough resembled a small town with several different buildings and districts which children could explore as avatars. The town itself was ‘mysteriously’ devoid of human life, but featured several texts that hinted at what may have occurred to result in the town being vacated. Texts, both written and visual, hinted variously at signs of alien invasion, localised pandemic and nuclear disaster...



Both Chris and Jemma were involved in this research project exploring the use of this virtual world when we were working as teachers in two different primary schools. As part of the project, led by academics from Sheffield Hallam University, a group of children from Jemma’s class visited a group of children from Chris’ class to explore the game together while located in the same classroom space. Children played on laptops in pairs, entering and exploring the virtual world as avatars. They interacted with their peers from each of the two schools on and off screen, using both an on-screen chat function and speaking to those in the room around them.

Children were given the broad aim of exploring Barnsborough to investigate what might have happened. This involved them in a range of reading activity: selecting different reading pathways as they navigated the game; reading text and images (still and moving) as clues, as they discovered them around the world; piecing together evidence and drawing inferences; following and investigating lines of enquiry. As well as the reading aspects of the game constituting a kind of literacy, children were also engaged in various types of writing activity, including note taking (both handwritten and using iPads), contributing to online group chat and writing a blog post on a shared blog about their experiences in the game and what they thought had happened.

Children's play and playfulness was apparent throughout the project. There were elements of ludic (Caillois, 2001) play in the way children seemed to enter the world, search for clues and communicate. Although there was no set route to follow around the world or definitive answer to their mission, the children seemed to draw on gameplay experiences from their home lives to 'play the game' of Barnsborough, following an unwritten set of rules for the genre. However, these ludic elements did not restrict play. The freedom the children had to investigate the world and develop their theories around what had happened was more akin to paidic play (Caillois, 2001) in the way that they spontaneously journeyed around the world in their pursuit of evidence to answer their own questions. It was also multidimensional (Sutton-Smith (2001), Hughes (2013)) as children explored, experimented and used their imaginations. This playfulness and creativity was apparent as children speculated about what had taken place, with tales of alien invasion or nuclear disaster abundant, as well as the more pragmatic suggestion that the world was actually a BBC film studio.

An important part of play when exploring the world was the suspension of disbelief children entered into, with all children seeming to collude to make the world 'real', referring to Barnsborough as a town or world but never as a game. Despite children pursuing different theories and ascribing meaning from clues to build individual theories, the existence of the world was never questioned and the sense of 'buying in' and working in role appeared to build a sense of mission and adventure and create a sense of reality and purpose.

The project involved a range of literacy practices. While many of these may be termed 'new' or contemporary literacies (for example, the use of a virtual world environment as a text, accessed via laptop; reading images and symbols; use of iPads to photograph, film and note take, communicating via online chat; writing on a blog), they were dispersed with what might be considered more traditional literacies (such as writing on paper; speaking with a peer). Indeed, some of the texts available in the virtual world, while digital, could still be viewed as traditional e.g. 'Wanted' posters and signage in the virtual world. It was striking how children moved seamlessly between using these varied literacy practices. For example, when one child discovered some cups floating in the cafe in the virtual world, she quickly reached for an iPad to film the movement of the cups before reaching for pen and paper to add to her notes about her developing theory, while continuously glancing back at the laptop screen to check and observe the phenomena of the floating cups. She was not seeing the task as a 'digital' one but rather was selecting the best tool for the job moment by moment and deemed filming the best way to record movement but notetaking on paper the most accessible way to record some ideas to use in her blog later. This serves to remind us of the interconnectedness of literacy practices as well as the value of purpose in setting literacy tasks in terms of the skills and tools it forces one to select. It also suggests her awareness of multimodality (Kress, 2009) and the affordances of different modes presented and available to her. The seamless way in which she moved between these modes implies their relevance and value to everyday literacy practices and may be representative of ways she might move between modes between in school and out of school contexts. This calls for further consideration of how multimodality might be explored in school literacy contexts.

Children's exploration of Barnsborough also warrants consideration in terms of what happens when open-ended tasks are set in classrooms. While it might be commonplace to prescribe to children set objectives, criteria, outputs and resources in literacy lessons, there is less opportunity to move between literacies and explore the affordances different media and resources have to offer when this approach is taken. While moving between literacies in this project, children used a range of different literacy skills. These included the reading skills of inference and deduction as they pieced together clues across the virtual world, for example, hypothesising, searching for evidence, note taking, descriptive writing, etc, etc.

This suggests that such open-ended opportunities can provide ample opportunity to meet literacy and National Curriculum aims without limiting what might be achieved within a particular lesson.

This example directly involves children drawing on their existing digital repertoires in a classroom context. The use of video gameplay would often be considered a cultural experience not usually located within school. However, by bringing it into the classroom the children participating demonstrated a seamless ability to transpose skills and knowledge from different times and spaces. This included drawing on gameplay skills and expectations such as how to navigate a game with cries of 'I think we're meant to go down here', looking for things and expecting certain things to happen.

Observing these approaches from the children highlighted the parallels between the skills children drew on from their experiences and knowledge bought from outside of the classroom / confines of the subject being taught, and those taught in schools as part of the English curriculum, such as making predictions and inferences and navigating texts. This was also apparent in the knowledge they drew on from popular culture, such as aliens, zombies, Dr. Who and nuclear disaster. Such knowledge supported the richness, creativity and playfulness of theories and plots developed by the children as they explored Barnsborough. There was productiveness and relevance to the ways in which children drew on this knowledge from home experience and applied it to the literacy practices they are familiar with using in a school setting. This highlights the potential value of making space for children's existing knowledge, thereby facilitating children's use of their 'everyday' literacies.

#### **Further reading**

More expansive explorations of the example above can be found in the following two papers. The first article gives a more expansive description of the children's play in and around Barnsborough, demonstrating several of the creative and collaborative choices that the children made while playing in the classroom. The second paper uses the children's gameplay as a starting point for considering how we need to reconceptualise literacies to take account of digital play, while also noting the challenges faced by teachers in enabling this kind of work in the face of increasingly restrictive curricular expectations.

Bailey, C., Burnett, C., Gill, E., Daniels, K., Monkhouse, J., Merchant, G., Rayner, J. & Taylor, R. (2013) *Zombie Apocalypse: children's problems solving in a virtual world*, English 4-11, no. 48, pp. 7-10.

Burnett, C., & Merchant, G. (2014). *Points of view: Reconceptualising literacies through an exploration of adult and child interactions in a virtual world*. Journal of research in reading, 37(1), 36-50.

#### **Cast Study 2: The Street**

'The Street' was a project that took place across three classes and two schools (two Year 5 classes in Derbyshire and a Year 3 class in Sheffield). It arose from discussions between the class teachers and researchers at Sheffield Hallam University (including Jemma and Chris) with an interest in how 21st century literacies might be explored in primary school classrooms. These discussions were guided by Burnett et al's (2014) principles of 21st Century Literacies and aimed to look at ways of meeting National Curriculum English and Computing aims in engaging and relevant ways by using multimodal and digital means of



communication between the classes and schools. Particularly relevant here are the principles to 'Recognise and build on children's linguistic, social and cultural repertoires' and to 'Use Playful pedagogies'.

The idea of 'The Street' was an open-ended environment to allow children to communicate and collaborate across the schools. It began with a sound clip of the street (including a siren, wind, rain, footsteps, birds and tyres on a wet road) from which children imagined what it might be like. The Year 5 classes responded by writing descriptions which they shared with the Year 3s via a shared blog (using Kidsblog). The descriptions and sound clip were responded to by the Year 3s who drew pictures before developing their ideas into digital maps using the 'Explain Everything' app and then writing descriptions on the blog. From this point, what could have remained quite separate activity between the two schools, other than the sharing on the blog, took off in terms of collaboration. The Year 5s in one school picked up on the idea of 'snatching birds out of the sky' in one of the Year 3 descriptions and the resultant activity of breaking news Tweets and filming of news reports explored the backstory of the alleged 'bird napper', who was named Tom O'Brien and became The Street's first character.



Digital map created by a Year 3 pupil in response to the sound clip

It is interesting to consider how this plot was developed between the two schools, with ideas being built upon almost in a ping-pong fashion via the shared blog and both schools taking genuine ownership and investing in the character. It is as if working on an online space removed the geographical barrier between the two schools and the barrier one might expect when working with strangers. Although such a response to other's ideas could potentially have happened within the walls of one classroom, it was as if working in the boundless online space multiplied the impact of working with and building on each other's ideas, giving them a sense of authority and credence. Drawing on the thinking of Massey (2005) and Lefebvre (1991), the space created for shared thinking and creation of The Street could be thought of as the product of social interconnections afforded by the blog and responding to each other's texts. The impetus working in this shared space provided for building on each other's ideas continued throughout the project, with children composing multiple texts including Haiku poems and estate agent brochures. While the project made use of shared space between classrooms and schools, it is also worth considering the potential such an

approach holds for creating shared spaces between school and out-of-school spaces and the opportunities this might open for engaging in literacy practices.

The multimodal and digital form of texts created is worthy of discussion too. The use of sound as a stimulus to set the scene for multiple modes of communication from the project's inception, and the response to this through drawing, creating digital maps and blogging, invited the children to play with and pursue multiple modes from the outset. The invitation to explore different modes seemed to impact in various ways. Choices over the directions the project took and the texts they would pursue were very much child led. This led to greater exploration of what might be considered home or contemporary literacies, such as Tweets and television broadcasts. Children brought their home experiences to these literacies, and these experiences seemed to lead to the creation of texts that the teachers identified as being different from what they might expect the same children to produce in typical English lessons. The valuing of contemporary literacies not only brought about different potential for the types of texts, but also the way the texts were constructed. Children seemed to draw on more sophisticated language, as if the audience they were writing for demanded it. They also seemed less concerned about issues of transcription and used iPads and software to support these elements, seemingly being much happier to commit words to the page and then return later to edit and improve. The approach also seemed to offer a platform to children who may have been considered reluctant by their teachers when working with more traditional school literacies. It was as if the privileging of contemporary literacies privileged these children and enabled them to draw on their repertoires effectively and creatively. The use of audience afforded by sharing texts on the blog (and other platforms such as Twitter) seemed integral to this as children were focused on the need to communicate effectively and selected modes accordingly. As the New London Group (1996) suggests, the types of literacies and modes of communication explored reflected the complex and culturally diverse nature of communication and enabled children to draw on the full range of modes of communication available to them. As well as an awareness of a wider audience, the year 3s appeared particularly aware of having Year 5 pupils within their audience. This seemed to spur them on with wanting to be accurate in their use of grammar and punctuation and ambitious in their use of vocabulary. It also led to some children including more mature themes in their writing than they usually would, as if the Year 5 audience demanded it. While the aim of the project was not to cover specified National Curriculum objectives, it should be noted that participating in these literacies resulted in many curriculum objectives being met and for some children to a level that exceeded teacher expectations.

The use of the digital and the multimodal also seemed to invite a level of playfulness. The open-ended invitation to create based on a sound clip acted as a springboard for this playfulness, akin to Caillois' (2001) understanding of paidic play being spontaneous, improvisational and free in nature. This was apparent in the playful ways in which characters such as Tom O'Brien the 'bird snatcher' were created, the playful use of language in descriptions, poetry and other texts, and the playful use of drama as children took on various roles for their television broadcasts. Each of these separate episodes in themselves could be described as playful but the spontaneous and often unpredictable ways in which they emerged in real time and were led by the children could also be described as playful, as if children from the different schools and classes were taking turns as they played the game across the gameboard of the blog. Another interesting example of playfulness from the project comes from the level of investment in the fiction some of the Year 3 children entered into. This became apparent to the teacher of those children one afternoon as a group of children asked about The Street, 'Is it real?', apparently dismayed after hearing rumours on the playground that the teacher had been 'caught' finding images for The Street online and

that it might have been made up all along. This level of investment is suggestive of the level of playfulness children are willing to enter into and what this offers to the exploration of texts.

### Further reading

A more detailed exploration of the example above can be found in the following paper. It gives a more expansive explanation of the research project, including aims and outcomes, and further examples of texts produced through the collaborative project.

Monkhouse, J., Baker, W., Daly, A., Power, D., Bailey, C., Burnett, C., Daniels, K., and Merchant, G. (2017) The word on the street: a cross-school collaboration. *English 4-11*, no. 59, pp. 17-20.

### Case Study 3: Building a virtual community

Chris first set up a Minecraft Club for a group of Year 6 (10 and 11 year old) children as a primary school teacher, at the request of a child in his class. Unsure of how to incorporate Minecraft into his classroom, but eager to make connections between school and children's wider cultural interests, he initially ran a weekly lunchtime club, using an adapted version of the world building videogame Minecraft. Minecraft was a game which many of the children already played and talked about, and it was interesting to see those who might be considered experts in the game teaching others who were less experienced how to play. In the club, located in their classroom, children played the game using laptop computers remotely connected to a server running the game world on a laptop. A very open objective was set for the club - for the children to create a 'virtual community'.



The children interpreted this invitation in multiple ways, engaged in a range of playful behaviours during the club both on and off screen. They clearly loved playing the game, and the playful, paidic (Callois, 2001) atmosphere generated seemed to afford a kind of socialising opportunity that wasn't usually available to children coming to the end of their primary school experience. The open and exploratory nature of the club, afforded by the on-screen sandbox videogame and the very broad remit for play, felt like a refreshing change from the more directed, objective driven nature of the rest of the school day. Children were working together, organising themselves, making plans and, largely, enjoying themselves while collaborating with a broadly shared purpose. The club wasn't entirely unproblematic, and there was some conflict and upset at times. However, the children generally worked

through these issues independently, self-organising to work out ways to avoid these instances which punctuated their play. The children voluntarily took part in the club, and this level of engagement and enjoyment encouraged Chris to think of ways in which he could extend this experience into the more 'formal' space of our subject driven curriculum. This led to the children producing creative writing based on their experiences in the game, and exploring a 'destroyed' world as part of a topic relating to environmental disasters.

Having run the club for a year at lunchtime, Chris left his role as a teacher and undertook a PhD examining another iteration of Minecraft Club, in the same school but with a different group of children, once per week in an after-school club. Here, the children collaborated on a weekly basis to create a space that they named 'Banterbury'. The use of the term 'banter' in the name of their community directly echoed the friendly, bantering nature of the children's interactions. Research around this subsequent club showed that the children often engaged in a kind of play that was termed 'emergent'.

As well as building on screen, in the game, children also played and interacted in and around the physical environment. This involved a diverse range of literacy practices including: collaborative singing (particularly memorable was the adaptation of the song 'Feed the World' to fit the words 'Free the Sheep'); self-directed reading and writing; and even, on one occasion, a very sensitive and collaborative role play – on and off screen - of a funeral about the death of an in-game horse. As such, this case study shows the diverse ways in which children again drew on existing digital repertoires in their game, but in ways which were collaborative, spontaneous and coexisted effortlessly with other dimensions of their wider cultural experiences albeit in the classroom context.

**Further reading:**

The following work expands on the ideas presented in this example. The first chapter focuses on one 'episode' of gameplay from the club, examining the significance of children's spontaneous and playful singing that was prompted by an in-game event. The second text is a book that explores the club from multiple perspectives, while also exemplifying how the kind of multimodal literacies engaged in by the children can also make their way into other contexts. To do this, the book uses comic strips to expand on theory and to represent aspects of the club. The third paper focuses on the ways in which children's own interests, digital and otherwise, can play an important part in creating inclusive spaces in schools. It emphasises this with a particular focus on neurodivergent pupils, providing recommendations for how teachers can promote 'neurodivergent literacies' in their classrooms by including wider cultural experiences, like Minecraft, in their practice.

Bailey, C. (2016) Free the sheep: improvised song and performance in and around a Minecraft community. *Literacy*, 50 (2). pp. 62 – 71.

Bailey, C. (2021) *Screen Play Experiences in Education: Visual Methods in Research Representation*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Bailey, C. (2023). 'Neurodivergent literacies': exploring autistic adults' 'ruling passions' and embracing neurodiversity through classroom literacies. *Literacy*, 57(2), 120-131.

## **Conclusions and implications for practice**

The three case studies presented here show how it is possible to integrate digital experiences alongside traditional learning. Drawing on children's existing digital repertoires in the classroom not only reflects the evolving nature of literacy but also acknowledges the diverse experiences and skills children bring with them. By embracing both physical and digital learning environments, educators can create more inclusive and dynamic spaces that resonate with children's everyday lives.

Broadening our conception of literacy to include digital literacies is essential. Traditional curricula often emphasize rigid structures that can limit the exploration and utilisation of digital tools. However, recognising digital literacy as a critical component of education allows for a more holistic approach, addressing the multifaceted ways in which children engage with and interpret the world. Overcoming the challenges posed by a rigid curriculum requires innovative strategies that integrate digital tools and methodologies, ensuring that education remains relevant and engaging for today's learners.

Children's ability to navigate a range of literacies in each of the examples presented here highlights their expertise in drawing on multiple sources and seamlessly transitioning between them. This fluidity is a testament to their adaptability and proficiency in using various forms of communication and information. Encouraging children to harness this expertise not only enriches their learning experiences but also fosters a deeper understanding of how different literacies intersect and complement each other. Educational experiences that embrace a playful approach can unlock a wide range of literacies, fostering creativity and collaboration. Playfulness in learning encourages experimentation, emergence, and the exploration of new ideas, making the educational process more engaging and effective. By creating an environment where play and learning coexist, educators can support children in developing a robust and versatile literacy toolkit, preparing them for the complex and interconnected world they will navigate as they grow.

### **Questions for Critical Reflection**

- What experiences of literacies do children you work with seem to draw on as they transition between in school and out of school spaces?
- What opportunities are there for you to further enable children to draw on their out of school experiences of literacies when in the classroom?
- How do you draw on children's digital repertoires within your classroom literacy practice?
- How might further space be made for acknowledging and drawing on digital literacies in your English pedagogy?
- In what ways might you embrace playful pedagogies in your teaching of English? What opportunities might this open up?

## References

- Bailey, C. (2016) Free the sheep: improvised song and performance in and around a Minecraft community. *Literacy*, 50 (2). pp. 62 – 71.
- Bailey, C. (2021) *Screen Play Experiences in Education: Visual Methods in Research Representation*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bailey, C. (2023). 'Neurodivergent literacies': exploring autistic adults' 'ruling passions' and embracing neurodiversity through classroom literacies. *Literacy*, 57(2), 120-131.
- Bailey, C., Burnett, C., Gill, E., Daniels, K., Monkhouse, J., Merchant, G., Rayner, J. & Taylor, R. (2013) Zombie Apocalypse: children's problems solving in a virtual world, *English 4-11*, no. 48, pp. 7-10.
- Belshaw, D., & Higgins, S. (2011). Digital literacy, digital natives, and the continuum of ambiguity. Retrieved from [DougBelshaw.com](http://DougBelshaw.com).
- Burnett, C., & Merchant, G. (2014). Points of view: Reconceptualising literacies through an exploration of adult and child interactions in a virtual world. *Journal of research in reading*, 37(1), 36-50.
- Burnett, C., Davies, J., Merchant, G., & Rowsell, J. (2014). New meaning-making practices: A charter for literacy education. In J. Rowsell & K. Pahl (Eds.), *New literacies around the globe* (pp. 154-166). Routledge.
- Caillois, R. (2001). *Man, play, and games*. University of Illinois Press.
- Colvert, A. (2020). Presenting a new hybrid model of ludic authorship: reconceptualising digital play as 'three-dimensional' literacy practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 50(2), 145–165.
- Hobbs, R. (2010). *Digital and Media Literacy: A Plan of Action. A White Paper on the Digital and Media Literacy Recommendations of the Knight Commission on the Information Needs of Communities in a Democracy*. Aspen Institute.
- Hughes, B. (2013). *Evolutionary playwork and reflective analytic practice*. Routledge.

Jewitt, C. (2013). Multimodal methods for researching digital technologies. In S. Price, C. Jewitt, & B. Brown (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of digital technology research* (pp. 250-265). Sage Publications.

Kress, G. (2009). *Multimodality: A social semiotic approach to contemporary communication*. Routledge.

Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (2011). *New literacies: Everyday practices and social learning* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill Education (UK).

Lefebvre, H. (1991). *The Production of Space*. Blackwell.

Maine, F. (2017). The bothersome crow people and the silent princess: exploring the orientations of children as they play a digital narrative game. *Literacy*, 51(3), 138-146.

Massey, D. B. (2005). *For space*. Sage.

Monkhouse, J., Baker, W., Daly, A., Power, D., Bailey, C., Burnett, C., Daniels, K., and Merchant, G. (2017) The word on the street: a cross-school collaboration. *English 4-11*, no. 59, pp. 17-20.

Pahl, K., & Rowsell, J. (2005). *Literacy and education: Understanding the new literacy studies in the classroom*. Paul Chapman.

Sutton-Smith, B. (2001). *The ambiguity of play*. Harvard University Press.

The New London Group. (1996). A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Designing social futures. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(1), 60.