Popular culture is very important to the lives of young people and computer games form a vital part of that culture, especially for middle school students.

Researchers from the School of Education at Deakin University are investigating computer games in terms of what they might offer teachers in their work with students, and what students might be learning from these games.

Chief Investigator, Dr Joanne O'Mara, discusses the work of the Australian Research Council funded project, 'Literacy in the digital world of the twenty-first century: learning from computer games', led by Professor Catherine Beavis.

Often the temptation for schools is to ban popular culture from the schoolyard, rather than to consider how they might use it for their own purposes. In addition to being extremely engaging, many computer games require players to learn and use very distinct literacy skills.

The literacy practices young people use in computer gameplay parallel those of other new media and some dramatic play practices. I am concerned that students develop new literacy skills alongside a critical understanding of new media and the cultural practices played out in their usage.
This project has been very respectful of young people and their use of computer games and of teachers and their work with young people.

The relationships that have been built between the teachers, students, researchers, schools and our industry partners (the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, the Australian Centre for the Moving Image and the Victorian Association for the Teaching of English) have provided a context where we have been able to work together in productive ways.

One of the highlights of the project for me has been the opportunity to work with English teachers from a variety of school settings, and to see the personal commitment all of these teachers have to their students.

I am always aware of the differences in support that these teachers receive from their school community and how much difference that makes to their ability to try new ideas and make changes to their classroom practices and curriculum.

This is particularly true when it comes to using technology in the classroom. As an education lecturer I meet with many teachers and visit many schools, from those who have complete access to sophisticated technology and technological help on tap, to those where there are very limited resources and no help.

The teachers involved with the project used computer games in many different ways in their English teaching. Some used the games to support and extend literary studies – examining fantasy games as part of this genre. Other classes made their own computer games – designing the games, making and creating all of the sprites. Some classes examined the more serious games and one group studied the gaming practices of younger children.

Teachers reported a range of literacy outcomes for the students, in terms of increased critical literacy, increased code breaking skills and a deeper understanding of how different texts are constructed and shaped. It was widely reported that the usage of computer games in the classroom is engaging for students.

We are currently in the final stages of the project and findings, curriculum samples, a forum and other discussions about the work will be held at this year’s Victorian Association for the Teaching of English (VATE) conference, being held on 7-8 December at Deakin University.

VATE is hosting a full strand focusing on the outcomes of the project. There will be a workshop on making your own computer games that features some of the games made by junior students, a workshop on using serious games in the English classroom, and a forum on gender and computer games.

Many of the teachers involved in the project are presenting their work. While the work has a secondary English focus, it would be of interest to primary school teachers and teachers of related subjects.

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