

Multimodality and assessment

Do you dare enter? Part story, part game, a text designed to be different

by Petula Bhojwani



Children today are immersed in popular culture and media texts. Crucially this also means that they are engaged in many different worlds as they move with apparent ease in and out of fantasy, virtual, 'real-life' and the imagined; worlds which are shared, and worlds that they choose to experience alone. One of the important challenges for schools is to recognise that many children will arrive in the 'real-life' experience of the classroom expecting more from a text. Clearly, in recent years technological change has provided an increasingly 'digital' generation with greater choice through an array of platforms, which prompt play and offer new opportunities. Their prior experience of the screen and interaction with many modes such as word, picture, sound, gesture and movement also mean that children bring an expectation of multiple levels and pace from a text.

As a consequence, the ever-evolving definitions of literacy have changed the focus for many practitioners to multimodality in addition to the monomodal text. This of course does not mean that a classic novel like *The Secret Garden* cannot be experienced multimodally; for many years teachers have successfully combined film, drama, written work and illustration to open up text to the most reluctant learners. However, the new concern motivating many teachers is how to develop learning through the affordance of the screen and exploring the design of multimodal texts.

'... they move with apparent ease in and out of fantasy, virtual, 'real-life' and the imagined...'

The following case study describes how a Year 6 class teacher, Sarah Warriner from Ethel Wainwright Primary School in Nottinghamshire, inspired even the most reluctant learners in her class by adopting a multimodal approach. Sarah's key text was *Deathtrap Dungeon*, a single-player role-playing gamebook, written by Ian Livingstone (1984), one of the creative pioneers in the successful 'Dungeons and Dragons' genre. Since his series was launched its popularity has led to further novels, magazines, board games, video games and role-playing game systems.

Perhaps controversially, Sarah had chosen a fighting fantasy narrative but her selection was based on the quality of the descriptive writing and the opportunity provided for her children to play and read at the same time, not to mention keep score and plan their strategies on paper! An explanation for the increase in the children's reading stamina and engagement with the text can be summed up in two words: 'enjoyment' and 'choice.' In brief, the child becomes the main character/ player and the plot can only develop from a decision or roll of a dice; 'the read' quickly becomes a game and so, as in any game, the player is striving to win. In the case of a gamebook, the reader attempts to control the path that is taken through the story; as a consequence, the text provided exciting opportunities for Sarah's class to take on battles, get past obstacles and outwit villains, whilst planning strategic routes and taking chances in a fantasy world. In the pressing 'real-life' of the classroom, she observed the children encountering many dangerous monsters and making their way through the pages unharmed, beaming with eager responses or opinions on what they had experienced and achieved.

'...children bring an expectation of multiple levels and pace from a text.'

In terms of 'school literacy' the opportunities were clearly there for Sarah to implement in her teaching. She had chosen a text with:

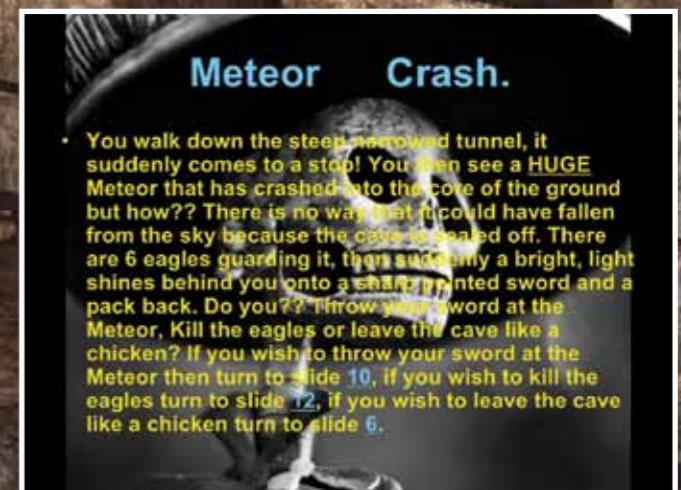
- rich descriptive language
- techniques to make the text come alive
- different structures to create coherence and impact
- narrative techniques to engage and entertain the reader.

The interactive genre puts demands on the reader and can be compared to many console game fantasy worlds. It provides multiple reading paths and identities to which the 10 to 11-year-olds were clearly drawn in their discussions. As a class they focused on Livingstone's style of language as they proceeded through the dungeon. Once completed, Sarah ensured that the children returned to the text in groups and considered how the story would change if they made different choices at key points in the book. By reflecting on the impact of their decisions they were already thinking about new stories and so, following several lessons which explored features of the text, Sarah felt that the children were more prepared to create their own versions.

'The interactive genre puts demands on the reader...'

Sarah was keen to make the link to the children's home experiences of game worlds alongside the 'school text' and so decided that the game stories would be multimodal onscreen versions. This meant that in addition to the four text features listed above they would need to carefully consider the design of their narratives and in doing so meet many more of the Primary Strategy objectives:

- integrate words, sounds and images imaginatively for different purposes
- use various structures to shape and organise text coherently
- use paragraphs to achieve pace and emphasis
- make informed choices about which electronic tools to use for different purposes
- present text effectively to communicate information. ▶



Hacker!

- You find Hacker who is hiding in the bedroom under the bed! Gain 3 luck points!! He has died his fur colour to a blonde! The wardrobe doors are opening and shutting repeatedly and then a slime, oozing monster creeps out! Hacker bites his leg and you gain 2 stamina points.

Chicken.

- You have decided to leave the cave like a chicken!! You now go to the Kitchen so turn to slide 8. And don't be a chicken and leave this time!



The 10 to 11-year-olds already had experience of using Microsoft PowerPoint™ and were confident in creating hyperlinks. This provided a platform for the game stories as Sarah showed the children how by hyper-linking slides they could provide the player with choices, similar to the experience of turning to a new section or page in the book. The children enthusiastically transferred their story plans from exercise books to the screen, transforming the narratives as they responded to the affordance of the digital medium. By drawing on their home gaming experiences sound effects were added, pictures imported, printed texts were layered over images, blocks of text moved onto the screen in different ways for effect and multiple story routes were planned. The outcomes were imaginative, 'part story, part game' onscreen texts. In keeping with Livingstone's style, titles included: *Welcome to the Castle of Fear*, *The Chasm of Death*, *Maze of Death*, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth*.

The children were motivated by the literacy activities and in particular the opportunity to explore the impact of their descriptive writing in peer review exercises. Their comments were constructive and justified with reference to examples from the *Deathtrap Dungeon* story.

The more fluent and assured writers rose to the challenge of creating multiple pathways, having the space to create new slides for the reader to navigate through. Those who were less confident were provided with a structure which allowed them to include the necessary hyperlinks. However, Sarah commented how pleased she had been with the overall level of writing that had been achieved across the ability range. She had identified a confidence in the children's use of descriptive phrases, repetition for effect and manipulation of paragraphing and sentence length, but also their quick response in including the regular interaction through a direct voice towards the reader, for example, 'Will you go to the Meteor crash or will you go to the kitchen??'

The unit of work had offered many opportunities for assessment. The reading of *Deathtrap Dungeon* had enabled Sarah to observe each individual's level of engagement and understanding of the plot; she had been able to develop inference and deductive skills and most importantly to this text she had identified whether they showed an understanding of how sections were ordered and why. Livingstone's style and text design was adopted into the children's compositions and became critical to the success of their fantasy games. Importantly, Sarah's assessments and analysis of the children's own compositions considered more than the written word. She noted how individuals had translated the page to the screen and utilised modes such as sound, picture, word and image in their own creations. By moving to the screen they had in fact learned to sign more messages to the reader and in doing so provided features that were not possible within the constraints of the page.

So what are the implications for classroom practice? Aside from the need to develop children's ICT skills, many teachers are now assessing children's increasing ability to make meaning from responding to and designing multimodal texts. Those, like Sarah, whose inspiring teaching is grounded in the relevance of working with multimodality, have already made a necessary start on re-evaluating and revising the definition of school literacy.

In terms of the future – as Sarah moves her children on into more regular multimodal text production, the new worlds that they will create have the potential to be extremely exciting. I believe that children appear to have little problem in moving in and out of fantasy and 'real-life' experiences so let's show them the new opportunities that can be encountered and made possible in the classroom. *Yes, we dare enter!* ■

Petula Bhojwani

With thanks to Sarah Warriner and her Year 6 class from Ethel Wainwright Primary School in Nottinghamshire.

'...they had in fact learned to sign more messages to the reader...'