

# MissionMaker and film education

James Durran

This paper outlines some ways in which so-called 'new media' have had an impact on film education at one pair of federated schools in Cambridge UK, and will focus especially on our experimentation with the educational game-authoring software, *MissionMaker*

## Media literacy

Parkside and Coleridge have a strong media curriculum, and teachers there have pioneered innovative ways of teaching about the moving image. We are not, therefore, representative of the majority of schools in the UK, but represent one leading edge of practice. Our approach to film education is part of a broader approach to 'media literacy', which aims to prepare children to be active participants in a media-rich culture. This literacy is partly critical: children learn to analyse the languages, forms, codes and conventions of media texts, and they learn to express informed preferences and opinions. It is also cultural: children explore the way that media texts relate to and shape society, and their own identities. And it is, importantly, creative: children work with a range of technologies to become producers of their own texts; analysis is balanced with production. New media technologies have affected the way that we approach all three aspects of film literacy, especially the latter.

## Film education and new media

Perhaps the most important example of a 'new' media technology influencing the way we teach about the moving image has been the arrival of cheap, accessible video editing software. This has made possible the creative repurposing and transforming of film texts in the classroom, as students make new texts, such as trailers or multimedia presentations, out of existing films. We have been particularly interested in how this blurs the distinction between production and analysis, in students' learning about film.

Of course, students also edit footage they have taken themselves, now made easy though democratised video technologies such as cheap DV cameras. All of our Year 8 and Year 9 students (aged 12-14) make short films within their media lessons. Mobile phones are increasingly being used in and out of classrooms, as a way of collecting data in video form or of recording events. And even webcams can be used as cheap, 'instant' cameras, for recording activity in classrooms, or for surprisingly sophisticated film-making.

In the purely digital realm, new animation software such as *Flash* has allowed for moving image production as part of multi-media texts, alongside and integrated with other textual forms, including still images, words and design. And 'machinima' techniques allow students to create film inside virtual worlds, harnessing gaming technologies, forms and aesthetics. We are just

beginning to experiment with the machinima software *Moviestorm*, and for some time have worked with a tool made by the Oxford educational software company Immersive Education ([www.immed.co.uk](http://www.immed.co.uk)) called *MediaStage* - a virtual studio, in which students can create scenery and action, and then set and control cameras and lights.

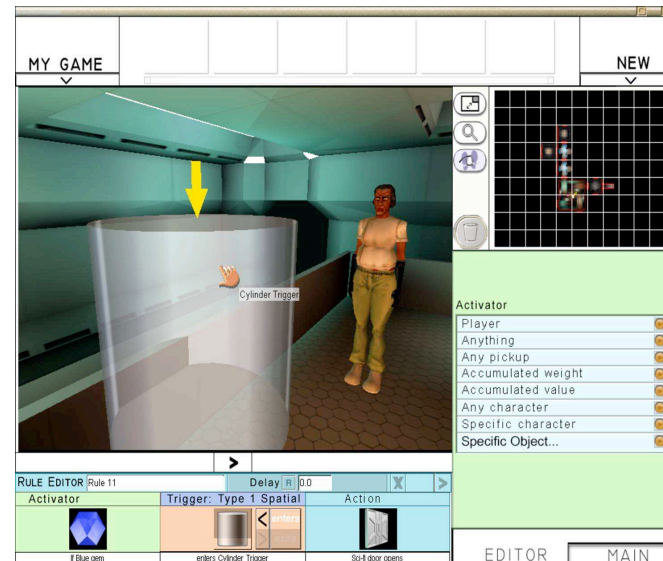
## MissionMaker

This paper focuses, however, on another piece of software from Immersive Education, called *MissionMaker*, designed to allow children to author computer games, in which players and characters interact in sophisticated three-dimensional worlds.

Computer games have, for some time, been an object of study in media education. However, it has always been hard to complement theory with production, allowing students to engage in creative meaning-making, and to take ownership of the forms and concepts which they are studying. This duality, central to good media education, has been made easy in the study of film by the accessibility of cheap cameras and editing software. However, software for making games has tended to be very limited. This gap prompted a research collaboration between

the 'London Knowledge Lab' at London University's Institute of Education, Immersive Education and a number of schools, including Parkside, to create an authoring tool which would allow students to engage at a deeper level with the principles of game design.

The resulting software allows students to construct complex, three-dimensional environments, which they can populate with a range of characters. By use of an accessible 'rule' system, they can control the causality in



these environments, in effect 'programming' infinitely varied games. Whether using the software to make elaborate, complex games, or very simple two-chamber games, they have to engage with the principles of 'game grammar'. They have to construct bounded environments. They have to invent systems of goals, challenges and rewards. They have to work with economies, of health, strength, points, and so on. They have to engage with notions of difficulty and pleasure. They have to control rule systems. And they have to invent and understand the way conditionality works within the game - if 'x', then 'y'. This sounds complex, and it is; yet the game-making process makes such principles accessible to quite young children.

### ***MissionMaker* and film education**

At the Parkside Federation, all Year 8 students (aged 12-13) work with the software to make games. This is part of a course on, specifically, computer games. However, it is interesting to consider how this relates to the broader media curriculum, particularly their learning about film and the moving image.

For a start, games are themselves moving image texts, with their own set of aesthetic and grammatical conventions. One activity that the students undertake is comparing a sample of game-play with a 'parallel' film sequence, showing the moment from *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* when Harry fights the Basilisk. Children mention the obvious points that each form has a different 'look', and that in the game the action is more repetitive and less complicated. However, they can also notice that the mediation of character is very different in each - through acting in the film, and through a fixed repertoire of actions, facial expressions and sounds in the game. They can observe how varied the camera angles in the film are, compared to the player's fixed, 'isometric' viewpoint in the game. They notice that the setting is slightly different in each. They can notice how the soundscape in the game is more limited, and each sound more repetitive than in the film. They can



explore how the music in the film is more closely illustrative of the action in the film, while in the game it is generic to the scene as a whole. Importantly, the conclusion here is not that games are somehow more limited than film, only that they necessarily operate in a different way - more like the symbolic narratives of myth or medieval romance, perhaps.

Even in this simple exercise, then, children are not just learning about the conventions of games. They are also engaging with central ideas to do with the codes and conventions of film, such as visual style, genre iconography, setting, camera angles, characterisation, viewpoint, and sound - diegetic and non-diegetic. And, crucially, these are all ideas which they have to explore further as they create their own games, making and justifying their creative choices.

Of course, children also have to engage with generic media concepts such as audience, pleasure and representation. In discussing these aspects of their own invented games, children make constant reference to films. They also engage with narrative theory, such as Todorov's structure and Propp's character types, and apply this to games as well as to films. Even a very simple 'practice' game made with the software, in which a player simply has to find a key and open a door, can be deconstructed in terms of equilibrium, complication, development and resolution. Children can even engage with the notion of theme. For example, a game might be built around the theme of, say, mercy; it might be based on an idea from myth; or it might take as a starting point the 'essence' of a fairy-tale, such as Little Red Riding Hood - 'don't stray from the path in the woods'; and so on.

What we have found, then, is that work with games does not just sit comfortably adjacent to work with film, but is impossible to separate from it: children's understanding of each is inextricable from their understanding of the other.

### **Further reference**

'**Digital Anatomies: Analysis as production in Media Education**', by Andrew Burn and James Durran, *Digital Generations*, Ed Buckingham and Willets, 2006

***Media Literacy in Schools***, by Andrew Burn and James Durran, 2007

[www.parksidemedia.net](http://www.parksidemedia.net) - examples of moving image production work by students