SACAR LA VOZ - INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON CHILDREN'S VIDEO GAME DESIGN

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Recebido em: 8 de outubro de 2025
Aprovado em: 10 de dezembro de 2025
Sistema de Avaliação: Double Blind Review
BCIJ | v. 5 | n. 2 | p. 74-97 | jul./dez. 2025
DOI: https://doi.org/10.25112/bcij.v5i2.4489

Brazilian Creative Industries Journal

ISSN: 2763-8677

RESUMO

Este artigo discute um projeto internacional de pesquisa em design de jogos voltado para crianças, realizado entre Santiago, Chile, e Londres, Reino Unido. A pesquisa foi realizada em escolas de Santiago e Londres e envolveu alunos de 11 a 15 anos na criação de microjogos (principalmente usando o software online gratuito Bitsy), que refletiam tanto os jogos existentes dos quais os participantes já eram fãs quanto os eventos políticos do mundo ao seu redor que consideravam mais importantes em suas vidas. O objetivo deste projeto foi explorar o potencial da criação de videogames para permitir que os jovens articulem suas opiniões sobre o mundo ao seu redor, em uma forma de mídia que fosse diretamente de interesse para eles e suas práticas culturais habituais. Para os próprios alunos, essa experiência também foi projetada para promover habilidades críticas de letramento digital e atuar como uma forma de permitir que eles questionassem as "notícias" que moldam sua experiência de vida, por meio da criatividade e do lúdico.

Palavras-chave: Educação. Criação de jogos. Crianças. Política. Criatividade.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses an international, children-focused game design research project, occurring between Santiago, Chile, and London, UK. This research took place in schools in Santiago and London, and involved students between 11-15 years old creating microgames (mostly using the free, browser-based software 'Bitsy') that reflected both the existing games the participants were already fans of, and the political events from the world around them that they found most important in their lives. The purpose of this project was to explore the potential of videogame making for allowing young people to articulate their opinions on the world around them, in a media form that was directly of interest to them and their usual cultural practices. For the students themselves, this experience was also designed to be a promotion of critical digital literacy skills and to act as a way of allowing them to interrogate the 'news' shaping their lived experience, through creativity and play.

Keywords: Education. Game making. Children. Politics. Creativity.

ISSN: 2763-8677

1 INTRODUCTION

Working with children in a school environment can be equally joyful and frustrating, and this complexity of experience arguably holds true wherever it is in the world one is doing classroom work. In the case of this paper, two former teachers discuss their experiences of conducting research with children in classrooms in Santiago, Chile, and London, UK, and how those disparate contexts shaped student experiences and engagement with the project's research focus - making simple, playable videogames that in some way reflect the lives of their creators.

Methodologically, it was important that the researchers find ways of conducting this research with a sense of equity of access in mind, as the research locations represent very different contexts. The work done here could be adapted for research with analogue games, but after considering the resources available to the particular communities involved, it was decided that video games were still an accessible enough option for our participants. Consequently, taking the free, browser-based software Bitsy (Le Doux, 2016) as a starting point, the research across the two locations leveraged the technology available to the research cohorts - school PCs - and the teaching experience of the researchers to work in the spirit of what, in Brazilian Portuguese would be termed *gambiarra* (De Paula Antunes, 2023; Messias; Mussa, 2020), or might loosely be translated in English to 'making it work.'

2 THEORETICAL BASIS

The researchers trained as teachers in their native countries, in Santiago, Chile, and London, UK, and as such, the discourses around 'media' and 'literacy' that they experienced woven into their learning and subsequent teaching experience were disparate. In the context of Chile, the framing of 'Critical Digital Literacy' (Ávila, 2021; Freire, 1996) was more familiar, whereas in the London setting, particularly at University College London's Institute of Education, the academic tradition followed the pathway from 'New Literacies,' (Street, 2001) to 'multiliteracies,' (Cope; Kalantzis, 2009) to 'Media Literacy,' (Buckingham, 2019; Burn; Durran, 2007; Potter; McDougall, 2017) with a related interest in multimodality and social semiotics (Bezemer, 2020; Bezemer; Kress, 2015; Kress; Leeuwen, 2001), which reflects the research conducted there in recent history. A combination of these traditions informs the work here, as the researchers consider that to be 'literate' in media form, you must also be 'critical' of it. This is as true of videogames and the process of game making as of any other digital media, however as a comparatively younger field, discussion of game literacy and game design, specifically as it pertains to adolescents, is less developed than equivalent work in filmmaking or other forms of creative work, though not lacking in

ISSN: 2763-8677

key discussion (Apperley; Beavis, 2013; Bacalja, 2020; Bacalja et al., 2024; Burn, 2021; De Paula, 2023; De Souza e Silva; Delacruz, 2006; Gee, 2008).

The theoretical side of the work presented in this paper expands on experiences of a PhD research project (Croasdale, 2025) on game design as a novel form of pedagogy for teaching adolescents about literary texts, along with pedagogy honed on a taught postgraduate module focusing on investigating conceptualisations of 'creativity' and creative practice in classroom teaching and other educational settings (influenced by (Ingold, 2014; Wilf, 2014)). Additionally, the researchers build on ideas presented in workshop format at a conference focusing on games in a Latin American context (Croasdale; De La Maza, 2025).

In order to make productive use of data from classrooms across the locations of London and Santiago, we will be using a conceptual web built from the influences outlined above. At its core, we frame this work with the model of Critical Digital Literacy proposed by Ávila and Pandya, in the tradition of Freire (Ávila, 2021; Freire, 1996; Pandya; Ávila, 2013), where making is both a form of literacy and a form of critique of the world. On top of this base layer, we consider literacy as a multiplicity, and an assembling of multimodal semiotic resources (Bezemer; Kress, 2015; Street, 2014) which allows us to recognise the nuanced complexity of the digital artefacts adolescents might make in a classroom setting. Finally, the ideas of 'creativity' that the researchers have deployed as teachers and embodied as students (Ingold, 2014; Wilf, 2014) are read against the idea of gambiarra (De Paula Antunes, 2023; Messias; Mussa, 2020) to make sense of how young people solve creative problems with what they have to hand.

3 METHODS

With a direct interest in supporting the learning experiences of diverse classrooms, the researchers elected to explore how video game design and play, and other creative work, might be used to allow students to express their opinions about the issues in the world that concern them in an authentic and meaningful way that expands the boundaries of traditional curricula. As such, this research develops past pedagogical and research experiences of the researchers, from their school teaching experience, to their teaching or learning in Higher Education, to their prior research projects and presentations (Croasdale; De La Maza, 2025; Croasdale, 2025). Through forming and testing an exploratory methodology for investigating creative principles of game design as a pedagogical strategy for working with students of ages 11-15 years, in schools in different contexts across London, UK, and Santiago, Chile, this project offers an adaptable set of principles for other educators to use, as well as a set of critical thinking points around the affordances of game design in school classrooms.

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The main objective of this research was to create a learning experience that integrated critical digital literacy practices (Ávila, 2021; Freire, 1996) through video game design that was reflective of the experiences of the students, including non-dominant groups within the participating cohorts (De Paula, 2023, 2024). In this study, participants experienced game design (and in Santiago, also film) framed as experimental pedagogy. Rather than using design work from the perspective of professional industry skills development, the methodology shifted the boundaries of what role games and design can take in education as vehicles for critical reflexivity. The student participants were invited to draw inspiration from diverse, personal cultural references, including literary works, films, visual arts, and personal experience. They were then taught how to use the free, open-source game design platform Bitsy, which allowed for optimal accessibility, whilst still focusing on digital game making.

The rationale shaping the design of the methods for this work was to build on the strong traditions of media literacy research at UCL, such as that conducted by Potter, and Burn (Burn, 2021; Potter; McDougall, 2017), and media education (Buckingham, 2019) in a manner that also incorporated influences from the critical and theoretical landscape of South America, reflecting one of the research locations. The potential for game design and making as an educational tool has been previously explored, for example in the work of Burn, and of De Paula (Burn, 2021; De Paula, 2023), however, the manner in which it was deployed in this study is original, as the multimodal signifying potential of game design is used with the focus of how it can marry the lived experience of students with learning across different subject areas. Use of digital and digitally inspired creative methods remains an important area for research in both London and Chile, where this project occurred, as the school national curricula of these locations did not sufficiently account for digital skills, media literacies, nor for critical approaches to media texts at the time of writing.

By bringing this research into classroom settings in the two very different locations, the research design allows for a comparison between the two, and therefore broadens and transforms the foundational concepts shared through prior PhD research, and also delivered in workshop form (Croasdale; De La Maza, 2025; Croasdale, 2025), as well refining what was delivered as a pilot run of the pedagogy during the same taught MA module that originally inspired the collaboration between the researchers.

Methodologically, the positionality of the researchers as former teachers, working with students in schools naturally implies an ethnographic stance. Though definitions of this form of enquiry are multiple, here, we take the broad view of ethnography as culture-focused, using multiple methods of data collection (audio recording, field notes, recordings/photographs/raw files of student creative work), using direct involvement of researcher, and affording status to the participants' own perspectives on the space of investigation (Walford, 2018). The foregrounding of the voices of the young participants of this research was of ethical import to the researchers, to avoid this project becoming extractative and

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exploitative, and it was of similar significance that the participants feel that they had gained something from the experience, whether that be a new skill, an opportunity for self-expression, or the chance to think critically about a new aspect of the world.

However, as the research involved the researchers visiting schools for limited weekly sessions, rather than being directly positioned in the school as classroom teachers, the study is more specifically to be understood as a 'focused (case study-based) ethnography,' possessing the traits of being more focused on a narrow object of study, being more time limited, and narrowing down the wider school community to a smaller group of students, which though contested as being the true boundaries of focused ethnography, function to describe what will be occurring here (Trundle; Phillips, 2023). By treating the two locations as discrete cases, we are then able to mount a clearer comparison between the different educational cultures.

Many examples of ethnographic and/or case study research in third spaces (Potter; McDougall, 2017) between education and arts practice exist, for example Coles and Howard's discussion of filmmaking education as serving a dual purpose of allowing 'marginalised groups to gain control of their representation in the arts and media,' and to develop filmmaking skills with a view to employability (Coles; And Howard, 2018), the work of Cannon in UK primary schools (Cannon, 2018), and the research of Bryer, Coles, and Pitfield (Coles; Bryer; Pitfield, 2023). As evidenced in the above examples and elsewhere, research with children and young people can be managed with sensitivity, and the researcher's capabilities as both academics and experienced former teachers, well-versed in both school-based research and school safeguarding measures, means that the proposed methods are chosen with the participants' wellbeing as a central concern.

Though the researchers will be working with the whole class/whole club, opt-in recruitment was used, so only students who consented, and whose parents consented, will be represented in the data outlined below, though students were allowed to participate in the intervention regardless of consent to allow for the optimal level of inclusivity. The data gathering for the research took the methods of researcher observations in the form of field notes and photographs, capture of student work produced during the project, and audio recorded student interviews. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for a more authentic capture of 'student voice,' but followed the structure of questions about student self-perception/identification; student textual interests (books/films/games consumed); student ideas of what constitutes 'games', in the initial conversations. Interviews later on in the process focused on the creative choices students have made with their creative work. The students' responses are anonymised for the purposes of safeguarding. Full ethical approval was gained from University College London as the 'home' research institution for this work.

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The main method for data analysis is qualitative multimodal discourse analysis, looking for emerging ideas across the data set, and also the broader discourses that frame what is observed (Potter, 2024).

3.1 LONDON WORKSHOPS

For the research in London, the researcher visited a school in the North of the city and worked for one day (June 2025) with a small class group during school hours (approx. 10 students, 12-15 years) selected by the Head of English and agreed by the Headteacher. This day-long workshop involved an initial setup by the researcher to establish ground rules for behaviour, and then opened discussion with students to establish what their understanding of 'politics' was, as well as scoping what their reference points in terms of games were. Ideally, this work would have occurred over a longer period, but in practical terms, it is difficult to negotiate time out of curriculum work for students in secondary school settings, even when a strong case is presented for the pedagogical value of activities like game making. As such, the one-day workshop was followed up by a second data collection of interviews, focusing on clarifying points of interest arising during the day.

Following this initial discussion, there was an introduction of the design tasks, focusing on character point of view, basic narrative starting point, and locations that could be realised as maps within the affordances of the software. The software option for the game making, Bitsy (Le Doux, 2016), was shared with the students, and its basic functionalities modelled. The rest of the day involved significant game making time for students, and culminated in time for the students to share their work and thoughts with one another.

The eventual data collected took the form of students' game files (in html), which could then be loaded and re-played through Bitsy's website. During the discussion of the students' existing ludic reference points, the students decided to represent their thoughts through the medium of slides using Microsoft's PowerPoint. This is a choice that has been observed before (Croasdale, 2025), and reflects the location of the research - as students are used to information in school being delivered through slides, they often default to this mode when they are expected to transmit information themselves.

Finally, at points during the day the researcher interviewed students (those with self- and parental consent forms) about their thoughts and experiences around politics, games, and game making, audio recording and then transcribing the interactions. Additional data was captured as field notes.

3.2 SANTIAGO WORKSHOPS

For the research conducted in Santiago, the researcher worked with participants in an extracurricular club focused on filmmaking and videogame making and play (approximately seven students aged 11–

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14), which she was employed to facilitate over the course of one year (two full semesters during 2025), with permission from the school principal.

The workshop took place weekly as a one-hour extracurricular activity. In its initial phase, it included exercises related to cinematic language and activities involving videogames. From the second semester onwards, the focus of the workshop shifted toward the development of videogames addressing political topics of interest to the students.

In the first session of this game development phase, a discussion was initiated around what was understood by politics and the ways in which politics is present in videogames. Rather than aiming for fixed definitions, the emphasis was placed on identifying how politics is represented in different games and on eliciting students' perspectives on these representations. Following this discussion, the task was introduced. Students were asked to design a videogame whose central rule involved placing a character in a world whose language they did not master, thereby representing the experience of feeling alien or foreign within one's environment.

Subsequent sessions were devoted to planning and to learning how to design a videogame using the Bitsy platform. The planning stage involved at least four phases, structured as a narrative with a transversal political theme selected and defined by each student. In parallel, a collaborative, tutorial-like process was developed, through which the group collectively explored the technical and expressive possibilities of Bitsy.

Over the course of at least eight sessions, students worked on the development of their videogames. Data was collected from the students' game files, which can be downloaded and re-uploaded via the Bitsy web platform.

At different points during the club, students who had provided both self-consent and parental consent participated in interviews about their experiences. These interactions were audio recorded. In all cases, the school's safeguarding protocols were followed and taken as guiding principles for all interactions with students. Throughout the semester, students also participated in individual and group interviews with the researcher, during which they reflected on the game creation process, their understanding of politics, and the difficulties and opportunities they identified in this experience. These interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. In addition, photographs were taken to document the students' working process, particularly during moments of collaborative game development.

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4 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1 LONDON RESULTS AND DATA

The London research day opened with a simple questioning of what students understood 'politics' to be, to establish a baseline of comprehension. The students initially struggled to frame what 'politics' meant, and to begin with, they aligned the term with politicians or people acting for some kind of change. When questioned further as to what kind of 'change' people might want to make, the students required some processing time to consider what might need changing about the world around them. Eventually, they returned some interesting points: 'cost of living crisis' was a phrase more than one participant volunteered. Another boy suggested, 'Like the climate… or the difference in pays [sic] between certain people…'. There were some vague references to conflicts, particularly to the genocide in Palestine, and an acknowledgement that politics often involves some kind of power imbalance.

The student cohort was a virtually equal mix of boys and girls, some ethnically 'White British,' others from immigrant families from different locations across the world. Some of the students spoke English fluently, whilst others were in the early stages of language acquisition. As such, the initial difficulties with honing a definition of 'politics' might be a result of the students being shy with the researcher as a new person in their classroom, but equally could be the product of the ways different cultures frame and discuss politics, or could be down to struggles with language difference and misunderstanding. The headline issues the students managed to raise, however, are not surprising to someone working in the context of England, as the phrases used - 'cost of living,' 'climate crisis' - are ubiquitous in their presence in English news media.

After discussing politics, the group discussed the games they played, and the list they generated was incredibly varied. The only analogue game mentioned was a game using playing cards, the rest were digital, so an interesting area for future consideration might be a deeper exploration of the extent to which young people still access analogue games in the geographical context of the UK, and with digital games the division of consoles, phones, and tablets as the point of access.

The games that the students listed as their favourites were: *Final Fantasy, Splatoon, Zelda* (new releases), *Zelda* ('original' games), *Pokemon Violet, Celeste, Shoval Knight* (the student who listed the last four also labelled them as AAA or indie), *Minecraft, Rainbow Six Siege, Ready or Not, Hollow Knight, Mindustry, Animal Crossing, Counter Strike, Halo, Mario*, and 'racing games'. This was a surprising collection of games for a number of reasons. Firstly, we can see a mix of AAA, casual, and indie games, as well as ones from new and legacy franchises. The diversity represented in the list suggests that the young people's

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points of access to games are broader than one might expect from the age group - the legacy and indie game references implying either the influence of an older family member, or access to a game streaming platform where they can explore whatever title calls to them.

Before we move on to consider the games the students chose to make for themselves, we can reflect on the list above as indicative of the wide range of pre-existing game influences that the students in the British school had available to them to draw on in influencing their making. As such, this gives us another way of framing the game products the children made - their work during the research day arises from their thoughts about what politics is, but also is generated from the game cultures that already surround them. The plans and games the students made, then, are complex texts that are completely unique to the individuals and their intersectional contexts.

After the issues of politics and the game influences had been discussed, the students began the planning phase of the day. The students' notes, examples given below, evidence the different kinds of pulls on their creativity - the political framing, their play experiences - as outlined above.

UK Student 1 writes, '*The year is 2625. The world has ended. Factions roam the empty world of the Slavic Peninsula, merely shells of their former countries. The factions of the Cyracs and the Cathics are at war. You, a lone survivor from a tribe long forgotten, must roam the vast lands of the Peninsula to try and find out what happened to this once great land, and form alliances with factions. But in the end, only one faction will survive.*' He adds some gameplay details as notes, stating, '*It's an open world, story game in which there are no happy endings. It's kill, or be killed; Difficulty will change what's on the HUD, limiting your accessibility as the difficulty increases; Fps with rustic weaponry, e.g. makeshift weapons; Crafting can make basic tools and food (get ingredients from foraging), but higher quality items must be bought from professionals.*'

UK Student 2, meanwhile, tells us, '*The protagonist is panting in the middle of a battlefield. A cutscene plays, his wounded friend says he'll hold back the opponents. The protagonist runs away, as he's running, he looks back and his friend gets overwhelmed and covered by the mass of the opponent's forces. A scream of anguish and sorrow escapes the main character's mouth. The m.c. dives behind a rock and fades into unconsciousness. While he sleeps a woman finds him and pulls him back to the nearby village. The main character then goes on to hack his way up the M'thack tower (evil guy's home) Near the entrance he finds a skeleton clutching a purple amulet. The amulet appears round the m.c's neck and he carries on. Over time he dies and reappears in the entrance again but still with the stuff he collected from the tower. They then go and trade that stuff for upgrades in the village. Repeat.*'

UK Student 3, finally, gives the narrative description, '*The world has collapsed, set in 3025 and has real-world locations overgrown by greenery and you have to explore and hope to find survivors and allies; This*

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game is an exploration game, no fighting; There may be non-real plants and animals but they are realistic; You have access to supplies via shops (free); No weapons to kill; Pet dog helps you throughout the story.'

All three planned game narratives lean strongly into the dystopian genre, though with some aspects of war or high fantasy story telling. There is a clear influence of the kinds of games (and other media texts) they consume in the way the desired narratives/cut scenes progress, but there is also evidence that they are trying to use the lexicon of games in their description in, 'HUD' (heads-up display), 'm.c.' (main character), and 'fps' (first person shooter). In itself, this kind of data presents a strong argument for the fact that game consumption and game design activates multiple kinds of literacy. We can also argue for the emergence of criticality in these choices, as each student is filtering the instructions for the task through their own experience and reference points and creating their own work from a series of reflexive choices, which points towards a form of classroom gambiarra.

Though the students' games were not as fully realised as their plans, they were able to start to translate their narrative and visual design choices into playable Bitsy games, experimenting with the procedural mode (Hawreliak, 2018), and considering how one translates between storytelling and play. They were interested in the different ways their games might have affective potential, either because their difficulty would create player frustration as they have experienced in their own game playing (FIG 1), or because their character was stalked through the dark (FIG 2), or because of their aesthetic appeal (FIG 3). In this way, education and 'professional' work produced within what we would recognise as the 'Creative Industries' are woven together, as teenagers do not necessarily see hard divisions between the different spaces they occupy in life: they use whatever resources they have to hand to create and communicate what they want to, to 'make it work'.

If we begin to look at specific examples of the London groups' games (all of the participants made individual games or partial games, but only a small sample are discussed here due to the space available to us for this paper), we can make more concrete points about the choices the students made in their process. (FIG 1) was developed by Student 3, whose ideas were included above, sees an avatar moving through the space of the game to collect items that generate a text pop up and gradually unveil the background of the world of the game. The map is hostile, though, and the purple crosses we can see in the frame are designed to be deadly to the player. If you touch them, your character 'dies' and 'respawns' at the start of the level, building a designed level of frustration, and demonstrating a literacy of procedurality that comes from playing games, but then critically considering how that experience might translate into design work.

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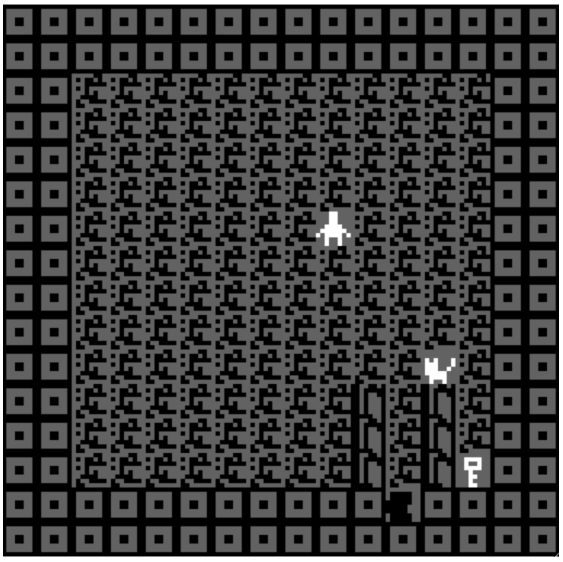

Figure 1

Figure 2

(FIG 2), meanwhile, was an ambitious game, where the student wanted to have a shadowy figure follow the avatar through the game to create an elevated feeling of threat. This choice requires a more advanced use of Bitsy, beyond its basic interface provision, and necessitates that the creator utilise HTML to achieve this effect. Again, we can observe this as an example of how a student's experience of game texts outside of the classroom can be mobilised to develop multiliteracies (Cope; Kalantzis, 2009) within it. The procedurality of the game is consciously used to create affect, and as a communicative practice is a powerful expansion on this student's ability to share his ideas about how a figure, in this case an avatar, can move through the world.

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ISSN: 2763-8677

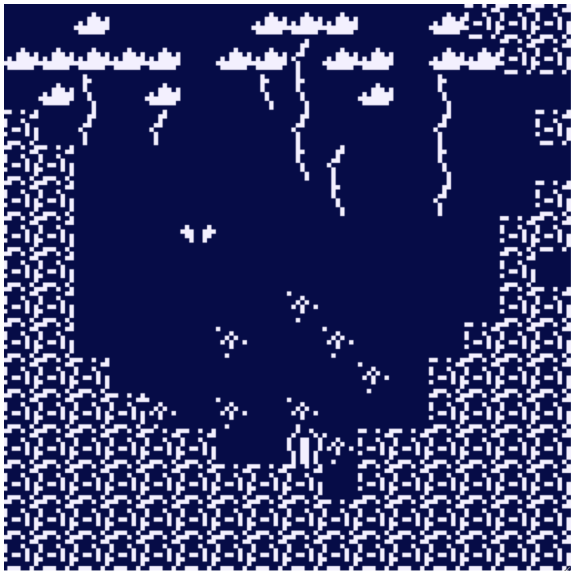

Figure 3

The final example, (FIG 3), represented a different set of choices. The student cited the remake of Final Fantasy VII as one of her favourite games, and she wanted to create a dystopian story with elements of the aesthetics drawn from generic fantasy. She remade the avatar to look like a pair of wings - as can be seen with the white pixels separated from the scenery in the upper left quadrant - that she animated to look as if they were flying. She created the rocky scenery and had the lines running from near the top of the frame animated to look like flashes of lightning. There was a hopeful theme to this game, where the avatar would try to escape and make their world better.

To consider the layers of what is at work between the narrative design, the making of the games, ideas about politics, and what the students felt was worth communicating, it is impossible not to acknowledge the complexity of this kind of literacy practice. The students critically engaged with the process, and when questioned, felt they had a moral obligation to make games that were informative but not exploitative, in that they created an awareness of what could happen after climate change and global collapse, but not use real life stories. They felt this would also be unacceptable in the professional creative industries, as using peoples' lived experience of climate disaster or conflict would be wrong, as it would involve making money out of suffering.

The process of game making, from design, to realisation, the post-make reflection also demonstrates a development of students' understanding around how politics manifests in lived experience, as they used their game influences as a way of shaping how they could create an avatar's experience of moving

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through a world destroyed through climate crisis. They also became more confident in discussing politics as lived experience rather than as an abstract 'thing' done by politicians.

For the London group, even over an intervention lasting only a day, the depth and complexity of the data generated is indicative of how productive it can be to include games and game making in educational settings, as a form of communicative practice. As will be seen in the more longitudinal data from the Santiago group below, when a more extended engagement with games is permitted, then the educational benefits of overlap between school and the creative industries expands exponentially.

4.2 SANTIAGO RESULTS AND DATA

This section of the data analysis first describes the children and adolescents who participated in the digital media workshop at a primary school in Santiago. As each participant developed their own videogame, we move on to seek to understand the creative process through their productions, including stages ranging from initial planning to design work, their thematic interests, their conceptions of what politics means and how it is present in videogames, the political topics they chose to address, the references that inspired their designs, the games themselves, and the students' reflections on their own production processes.

The group consisted of five students from 5th to 8th grade, all attending the same school and participating continuously in the workshop since April 2025. The group was composed primarily of boys and one girl. Two students openly identified as belonging to the Mapuche people, while the others identified as Chilean. The school has a vulnerability index of 92% and is located in one of the most marginalised municipalities in the area.

Throughout the year, media-based activities addressed both filmmaking and videogame production. From late August onwards, students began the challenge of creating their own videogame based on a political theme. As in the workshop conducted in London, students were asked to reflect on two guiding questions: 'What do you understand by politics?' and, 'Is it appropriate to create videogames about political topics?' Initially, students defined politics primarily in terms of rules and laws imposed by the State. As expressed by **Estudiante Chile 1**, "Hablamos sobre reglas que da el gobierno a los demás (*We talked about rules that the government gives to others*)", and **Estudiante Chile 3** similarly described politics as "leyes o reglas básicas (*basic laws or rules*)" (3:29).

These initial notions closely aligned politics with the idea of game rules, mechanisms that both guide and constrain players within videogames. To scaffold further reflection, students were invited to think about what their family members discuss when talking about politics at home. This prompt expanded their responses toward political ideologies and public concerns, including security. For example,

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Estudiante Chile 2 referred to "comunismo (*Communism*)" (4:06), while **Estudiante Chile 3** mentioned "izquierda, derecha, centro… seguridad (*Left, Right, Centrist… security*)" (4:08).

These responses reflected the broader Chilean political context, shaped by a presidential race in which political polarisation, security, and immigration dominated public discourse. The political discourses expressed by the students clearly revealed the influence of narratives circulating within their households. Students referred to corruption and dissatisfaction with political leadership, with statements such as "dicen que el gobierno hace todo mal (*They say the government does everything wrong*)" (**Estudiante Chile 2**) and "no hacen nada los políticos… con los problemas en general (*Politicians do nothing... about problems in general*)" (**Estudiante Chile 3**). Concerns around economic resources also emerged, with references to "plata (*money*)" (6:07) and "corrupción (*corruption*)" (6:15).

As the conversation progressed, students noted that discussions about politics also extended to war. When asked which wars they referred to, **Estudiante Chile 4** identified "la guerra de Palestina y la guerra de Ucrania (*The war in Palestine and the war in Ukraine*)." Living in a marginalised municipality with limited access to basic services, students articulated perceptions of having been abandoned by the State. These political references did not emerge as a coherent narrative but rather as a fragmented set of associations shaped by lived experience and media exposure. Dissatisfaction with government action, insecurity, economic precarity, and global conflicts appeared intertwined.

References to Chile's recent past also surfaced, particularly the Social Uprising of late 2019. Students recalled the 30-peso increase in metro fares and the widespread discontent related to the rising cost of living, which led to protests across the country. In more vulnerable communities, these events were associated with looting of supermarkets and pharmacies. As **Estudiante Chile 3** stated, "cuando hacen la revuelta, porque acá no hacen nada… y hay que salir a buscar el dinero (*When they revolt, because here they don't do anything... and we have to go out and find the money*)" (6:24), while **Estudiante Chile 2** explicitly referenced, "lo del 18 de octubre (*the events of October 18th*)."

When discussing politics, students also referred to presidents from the Global North who appear frequently in Chilean media, including Donald Trump, Xi Jinping, and Vladimir Putin. In relation to the President of the United States, students focused particularly on immigration, especially Latin American migration. Divergent positions coexisted within their accounts, mirroring dominant and often conflicting discourses in Chile regarding immigration from Venezuela. Students referred both to migrants seeking better living conditions ("están buscando un mejor lugar para vivir (*They are looking for a better place to live*)") and to irregular migration ("muchas personas pasan ilegales (*Many people cross illegally.*)").

Following these discussions, students shared the videogames they usually played and reflected on whether these games contained political themes. The games mentioned included *Roblox, Minecraft,*

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Sky: Children of the Light, The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild, Tears of the Kingdom, Clash Royale, Brawl Stars, Fortnite, Hollow Knight, and *Age of Empires*. This list reflects a wide range of franchises, with a smaller presence of independent games, and highlights the role of older siblings in mediating access to videogames. Most games were accessed via mobile phones, as only one student owned a Nintendo console.

When asked to identify political elements in the videogames they played, students initially struggled. To address this, the group collectively played *Wayfinder* during the workshop. Although the gameplay centres on collecting fragments of a haiku to prevent a tree from dying, students later identified a broader political background related to climate change. This interpretation emerged through guided collective reflection.

Students also emphasised that videogames addressing political conflicts should do so carefully or explicitly, for instance through content warnings or sensitive narrative treatment, in order to avoid trivialisation. **Estudiante Chile 3** noted that transforming conflicts such as those in Israel or Ukraine into videogames was particularly difficult. While students were aware of videogames that explicitly address political topics or dictatorships—such as references to Venezuela or Nazi Germany mentioned by **Estudiante Chile 1**—they struggled to recognise the political dimensions embedded in the videogames they themselves played regularly.

After discussing what is meant by politics and how it can be present in videogames, the following session marked the beginning of the planning process. For students in the higher grades, defining an idea and organising an initial structure proved relatively straightforward. In contrast, this process was more challenging for sixth-grade students, making it necessary to work from their initial ideas and to carry out the planning collaboratively (FIG 4).

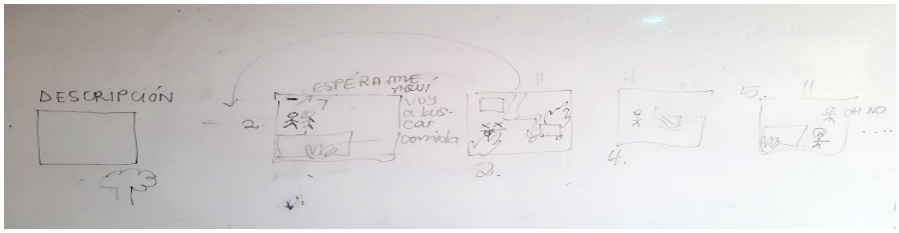

Figure 4

During this planning stage, students defined what their videogame would be about, who the protagonist would be, what the central conflict or challenge would be, and what political background the character would face. Based on these definitions, a range of visual supports, such as drawings and reference images, were developed collectively to guide the design of the game levels.

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In this context, **Estudiante Chile 1** proposed a videogame set in a desert environment, in which characters communicate through a coded language similar to Morse code and are unable to speak a conventional language. Within this setting, water is an extremely scarce resource, and the main objective of the protagonist is to find a water supply in order to survive. The student explained that this idea was inspired by a game he had previously played on the Roblox platform. Building on this reference, he began to develop a clearer sense of what he wanted to create, 'Así que tomé esa idea y empecé a crear, empecé a tener en la cabeza lo que yo quería hacer (*So I took that idea and started creating, I started to have what I wanted to do in my head*)'.

This process illustrates how Estudiante Chile 1 articulated his proposal through the frameworks, rules, and prompts provided during the workshop, as well as through his prior videogame references, in order to begin designing an original production.

It was also necessary to accompany Estudiante Chile 2 throughout his creative process. He described an apocalyptic scenario in which people rebel due to their dissatisfaction with the president, leading a family to flee into the forest, 'Mi juego trata de que hay como una guerra, hay una rebelión...Es que hay una rebelión de las personas porque no les gusta el president (*My game is about a war, a rebellion... It's a rebellion of the people because they don't like the president.*)'. In this setting, increasing numbers of people arrive seeking help, as the city is portrayed as being at war, with fires and widespread destruction.

When asked whether this narrative was connected to any personal experience or to an event he considered familiar, the student stated that it was not based on any lived experience. However, it is difficult not to recognise certain parallels between his account—particularly the presence of fear, chaos, and violence, and the Social Uprising that took place in Chile in 2019. During this period, public discontent with the presidential figure led to mass protests across the country, episodes of looting, and, most notably, the burning of several metro stations. These events were accompanied by a strong military presence in the streets and a pervasive atmosphere of fear, marked, among other elements, by helicopters flying over Santiago.

While this interpretation reflects the researcher's own perspective, it invites consideration of the potential impact that such events may have had on a child who, at the time, was attending first grade.

In the videogames created by the students in the Chile Group, several recurring transversal themes were identified. Most prominently, students constructed dystopian worlds and scenarios shaped by imagined futures marked by disease and pandemics, global warming, and wars or revolutionary processes. In contrast, only one student developed a videogame grounded in a situated and everyday experience, focusing on the experience of a student with a disability attending school.

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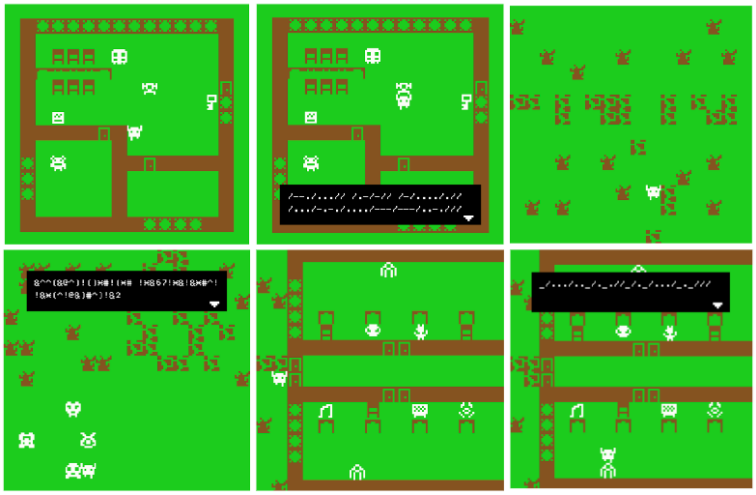

Figure 5

Estudiante Chile 3 developed a videogame in which a student with a hearing disability must make her way to school. With some of the characters she interacts with, communication takes place through Morse code, while there are other characters she is unable to understand (FIG 5). During the game design process, the student initially focused on constructing the world in which the game would take place, 'El tema es que X tiene que empezar desde A a B. Y en el camino ocurre la idea (*The point is that X has to go from A to B. And along the way, the idea occurs*). (11:09)'. Through this process, he realised that the protagonist needed to confront a series of challenges before reaching her goal, which was to arrive at school as he acknowledges whilst reflecting '(11:42) Porque tiene que haber algo en medio…Algo que bloquee… (*Because there has to be something in between…Something to block it…*) (11:49) Algo que llame la atención. O cualquier cosa que sirva para que el juego no se sienta tan simple o tan vacío (*Something eye-catching. Or anything that will prevent the game from feeling so simple or empty*)." **Estudiante Chile 3** acknowledged that his prior knowledge of videogames was fundamental to his creative work, as he built his game drawing on mechanics, structures, and experiences from games he had previously played.

Estudiante Chile 3 went further in his reflection by analysing the value of creating a videogame based on the story of a deaf person. He emphasised that the process of game design required him to place himself in the position of the protagonist, enabling a deeper sense of empathy. He explained that, through the game, he was able to experience the world from the protagonist's perspective, more specifically, to perceive it as a deaf person hears and navigates it. As he states '(19:51) Porque al hablar del tema se simpatizaría más con la gente que no escucha bien. Gente sorda…Se puede simpatizar más. Ahora veo el mundo entre comillas cómo lo ve o cómo lo escucha (*Because when we talk about it, we'd be*

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more empathetic towards people who don't hear well. Deaf people... We can empathize with them more. Now I see the world, in quotation marks, how it sees or how it hears)'.

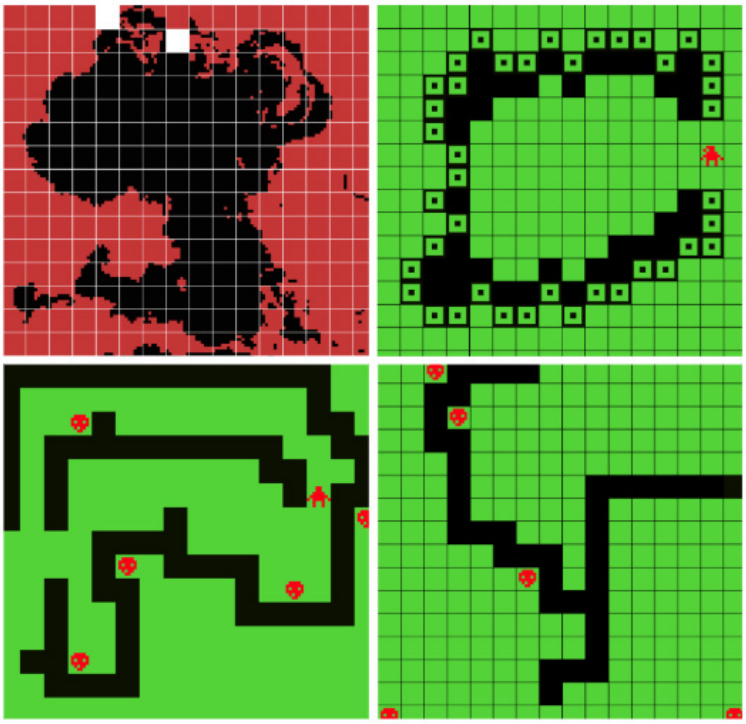

Figure 6

As with the London group, each student produced games that were radically different, with **Estudiante Chile 2's** map (FIG 6) demonstrating how they approached the mapping process and gameplay. Once again, the way students adapt their player biographies (Mitgutsch, 2011), their understanding of the world around them, the level of technical success they achieve with the software to gambiarra their own videogame in the classroom. Though the students' reference points across the group were different, as were their lived experiences, the willingness of the children and adolescents to make games that communicated creatively something about their world was consistent across Santiago and London.

4.3 COMPARISON OF LOCATIONS

Though the nature of the two school interventions were different in timing and duration, there are several key points of comparison that can be made. The first, is that neither group had an immediate understanding of what politics is, as the researchers would frame it. However, with further questioning, it became apparent that the young people from both locations did have a good understanding of the

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political issues that were relevant to their lived experience, even if they did not group these things, such as climate change, as political.

Their implicit rather than explicit understanding of politics was, again across both groups, inflected by family, friends, and social media, more than legacy media or school. As we can see with how the study day and the extra-curricular club developed, however, the young people's engagement with the process, and how the game making shaped their thinking, is complex and pedagogically meaningful.

If we return to the theoretical perspectives of Media Literacy and Critical Digital Literacy, then we can use these positions to argue about why games can function differently from any other media in the classroom. In different ways, emerging from thinkers in different geographical locations, these theoretical traditions in many ways argue for the same things - that learning about media is often best done through learning how to create, and that the process of creation fosters critical thinking about media products that exist in a person's wider mediated ecosystem. In the case of both the London and Santiago groups, the students learnt about creating a form of media they consume but had never created before, and in doing so were thinking through how one might realise politics in game forms.

What makes game making a unique form of creation, even in the simple, classroom-friendly manner described in the two case studies, is the mode of procedurality (Hawreliak, 2018). By having an avatar that moves, in some way, through a game space, the students had to think directly about how a being might interact with a world of their creation: an act inherently political. This is a different way of creating that developing a point of view in creative writing, for example, as in writing, language does all of the work for the reader and the writer works only in that mode, however, the student game makers had to balance their task, their ideas, and the Bitsy interface, which demands the modes of visuals, text, and code/rule making. It is less intuitive than writing, at first, and requires different layers of thinking and problem solving to achieve a playable game. Each layer of thinking - narrative, aesthetic, ludic - requires more and more critical choices, which allowed the students to be critically reflective both on how challenging game making can be, and on how they can create an affective response, appropriate to their topic, for an audience.

The value of the game making was very evident in both what the students made and how they spoke about it. Each of the groups responded to politics as the stimulus in different ways, but the way that they spoke in 'headlines' like one might see on social media, or repeated from legacy media by adults, shows that it is still interwoven in their lives. By giving them the chance to relate what they knew in game form, this research revealed that games have a huge and under-used potential in educational settings (Bacalja et al., 2024), particularly when the focus is on making rather than playing or being subjected to gamification. The sensitivity with which the students in both groups approached their work was also a

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positive similarity between the groups, as all of the participants approached the task with seriousness and focus, rather than just viewing games as simple fun. Their shared reference points in existing games, once allowed into an education space, also proved to be a valid form of literacy, helping to shape both narrative and procedurality.

5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

One thing that should have become clear in the comparison of the student experiences across the two locations described above is that digital making is a powerful form of pedagogy, and one that is undervalued and under used in schools, regardless of their location. This particularly holds true with the making of video games in the classroom. The data presented in this paper is only a partial representation of the critical literacy skills the students demonstrated across a varied and interesting data set, but the researchers hope it gives a sense of the potential this kind of pedagogy has for introducing media and critical discussion skills into different classroom environments.

By drawing on work in the Creative Industries that is particularly complicated, in the form of game design, as we have seen with the two different groups of students, there is a lot of potential for education and affective value. What is more, the playfulness of the students' practice in relation to games - how they created, and how they referenced existing works - was powerful in that it acted as a form of empowerment for them, in the classroom space where they are often only subject to 'appropriate' forms of knowledge and traditional forms of text and media. As such, our argument here is that, on the side of education, teachers should be more open to the potential of game making as a form of learning, and on the side of Game Studies, there should be further research conducted into the videogame playing lives of children. The literacies mobilised in this work were applied critically by the young participants, and are therefore of huge developmental potential in classroom teaching.

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