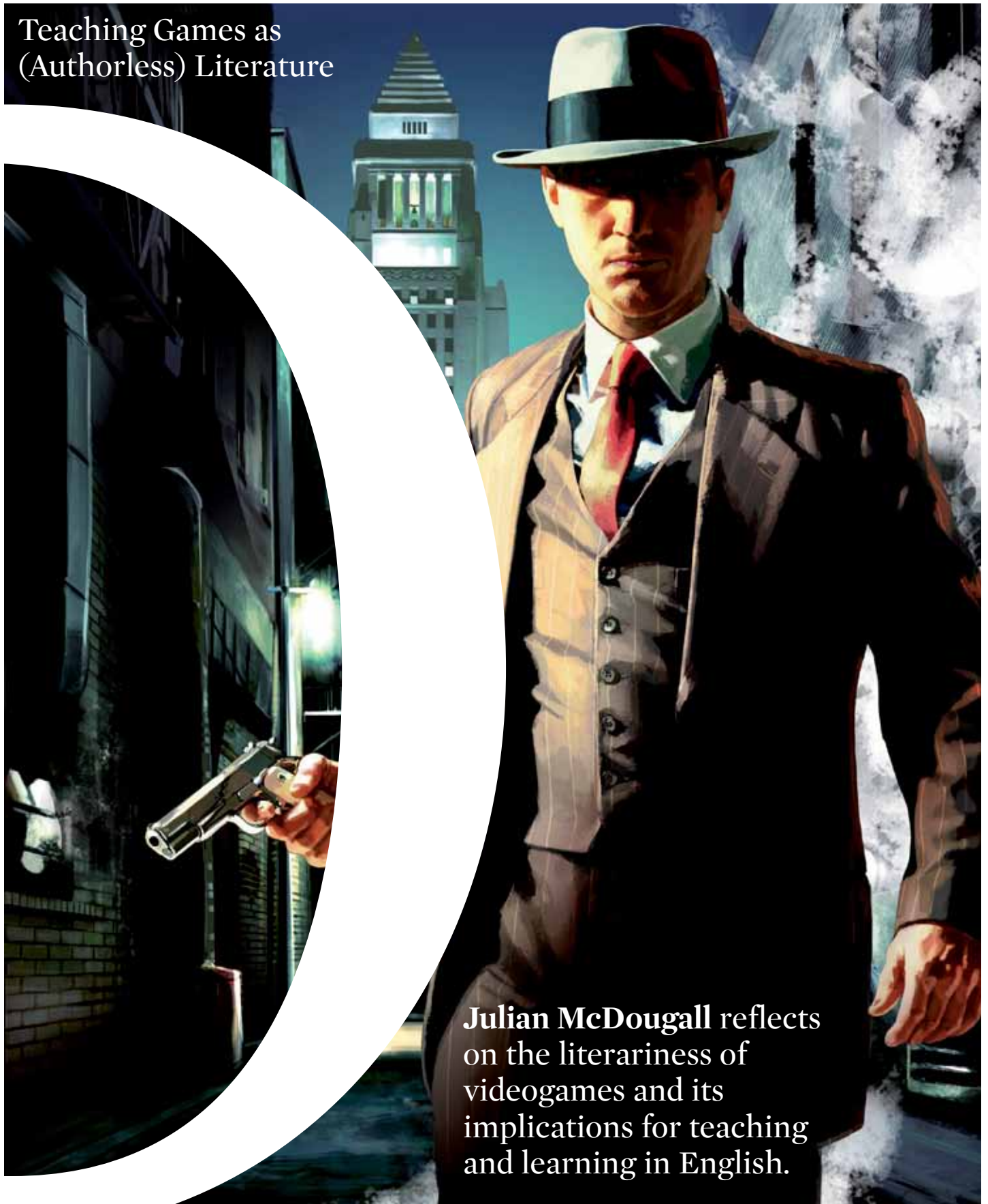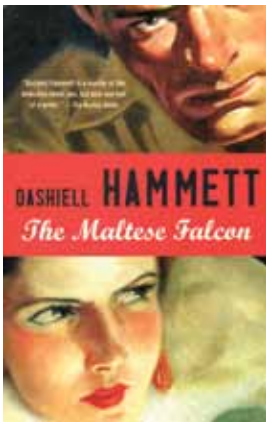# Digital Transformations

Teaching Games as (Authorless) Literature

Julian McDougall reflects on the literariness of videogames and its implications for teaching and learning in English.

In other story-telling methods, we see what the characters do – in videogames, we control what they do, within certain boundaries (Student – interview)

This article discusses the findings from a research project for which A Level and undergraduate English Literature teachers and students read, taught and studied the videogame *L.A Noire* as a literary text.

The extent to which English Literature teaching should, and can, respond to the digital transformation of reading, and whether there might be a subsequent need for an 'English 2.0', is at stake in this enquiry. But this research goes further than just paying attention to what Collins (2010) calls the integration of 'book culture' into visual media, in the form of e-books and online reading groups, and bearing witness to the proliferation of blogging and fan fiction in the digital age. Here, we pose the question of whether video game play itself can be considered a form of literacy and, if so, how the English Literature curriculum might 'remediate' to deal with this and how teachers' long-held views on their own 'expertise' might be challenged, along with the opportunities for more participatory forms of learning that could be provided.

The fundamental principles for English teaching at stake here, then, include the form of literature, the nature of authorship, the (re)framing of literacy, the role of the English teacher as 'custodian' of literary theory, and the extent to which 'schooled' reading practices might be challenged by interactive digital media.

The 'Set Text'

L.A. Noire was released for Playstation 3 and XBOX 360 in May 2011. The diegesis is set in 1947, and the game appropriates conventions from American *film noir* texts of the 1940s and 1950s, as well as later texts such as *Alphaville* (Godard, 1965) and *L.A Confidential* (Hanson, 1997) and novels by the likes of Elmore Leonard and James Ellroy.

A videogame is, of course, distinct from these by virtue of being author/auteur-less. It is pre-designed but 'written', in narrative terms, only when read (played). However, as a game with such a clear literary /filmic heritage, clearly designed (and marketed, by Rockstar Games) to be 'like a novel', we were confident that, of all videogames, this one would 'work' in English Literature, so our research was more concerned with how students and teachers would react and how they would relate this intervention to their ideas about texts, literature and 'subject identity'. In addition, the intention to 'digitally transform' the 'hard-boiled' detective novel might call us to further examine the relationship of exchange that exists in between linear and digital texts. This subsequent exploration of how gamer-students and English teachers might work with *L.A. Noire* to reconfigure dynamics of expertise could, potentially, begin a remediation of the curriculum and a (digital) transformation of what we think it means to 'read' and about the function of texts in the digital age:

Often, and this has been central to English teaching, the category (literature) includes only what 'adult' experts believe that young adults should read. The 'literariness' of the texts deemed appropriate in this category, often taken for granted within particular regimes of value, needs to be a matter for explicit debate rather than assumed to be a legitimate criteria of inclusion. (Richards, 2011: 18)

"As a game designed to be 'like a novel', we were confident that LA Noire would work in English Literature."

Two theoretical 'frames' informed our work. We were exploring how the 'utterance' of literature might be ignited by the videogame, from Bakhtin's (1994) conception of dialogism:

'[I]n the novel, dialogism energises within the very mode in which the discourse conceives of its object and its means of expressing it, transforming the semantics and the syntactical structure of the discourse. Here the dialogical reciprocal orientation becomes, so to speak, an event of discourse itself, animating it and dramatizing it from within in all of its aspects' (cited in Todorov, 1984: 60).

At the same time, we were interested in the challenges provided by extending the field of 'schooled' literature to the gamers' textual lifeworlds. In this sense, of key interest for our research is Potter's suggestion that we view the home / school boundary as:

… not a solid barrier as such but a semi-permeable membrane through which through which things of value travel along with the learners themselves. (Potter, 2012: 7)

The research project

A mixed methods approach was used for the research. Firstly, students contributed to a gameplay blog requiring them to discuss their in-game experience through the subject conventions of English Literature, culminating in answering a question constructed as typical of the subject's set text exam questions. Secondly, students taught their teachers to play *L.A. Noire*, with free choice over the context and logistics. Thirdly, both sets of participants returned to their usual roles to work through a set of study materials provided, designed to reproduce the format and style of the 'study guide' genre in English. Interviews were conducted after each phase and the outcomes informed a redrafting of the study materials which are now available online for teachers: **http://cedare-reports.co.uk/digitaltransformations/**

All of the students volunteered as self-identified gamers. The teachers were interested in seeing how English Literature might adapt to include games but they were more varied in their previous experiences of gaming – from a teacher who had never used a console to another who had already completed *L A Noire* prior to involvement in this project.

The project explored four key research questions:

1. What is the videogame *L.A. Noire's* potential as a learning tool and how does it function as a (digitally transformed) book (in the form of a novel)?

2. In what ways could *L.A. Noire* function AS a book (novel) to facilitate traditional literary analysis within an adapted version of the English Literature curriculum? In what ways would the English Literature curriculum, assessment and pedagogy need to 'remediate' for *L.A. Noire* to be taught and studied?

3. Can young people be re-engaged with other literary texts through gaming and what potential does this provide for a digital transformation of the English Literature curriculum?

4. Can a game text be 'taught' without being 'read' (played)?

The remainder of this article discusses the statements made by students and teachers during the various phases of the research, as well as some of the creative work produced in response to the study guide activities. All of the data – blog posts, video interviews and student work, as well as the final version of the study guide itself – now available as a downloadable resource – can be found on the project website.

Digital Transformation?

The extent to which L.A. Noire could be understood as a novel – and how far the curriculum could stretch in this direction – was a constant feature of the project, from students using literary analysis techniques on the blog to the 'transmedia' approach to genre in the study guide. The following responses were from more direct questions during the final interviews:

The question hinges on historical approaches to how we define 'the novel.' Clearly, when we are talking about a form that includes texts as diverse as The Tale of Genji written in Japan in about 1200, Don Quixote (Spain, 1600s), Pride and Prejudice and David Copperfield as well as more diverse works of so-called 'populist' or 'genre' fiction more recently, the novel itself cannot be seen as a singular entity, but exists rather in a series of continuities and variations that overlap and at times contradict each other. The same is also true of genres: they do not remain static, but recur with variation and modification over time as the world in which they are produced also changes. This was made clear in the case of the noir genre by the study guide – which was effective because it enhanced some of the ideas about how literary genres and narratives structures evolve that the students had already started to develop during their degree. (Lecturer – interview)

In terms of viewing L.A. Noire as a digital transformation of the novel, I think it's definitely possible to view it that way – though it may be more closely related to 'film noir' in its form and genre conventions, the eloquence of the game's script, exemplified in particular by the speech

between Cole and his partners while driving around Los Angeles is something which I find is usually reserved for the novel and certainly there are even blatant intertexts in the game in the form of Shelley's poetry that plays a key role in Cole's time on the homicide desk. (Student – interview).

There's a contradiction in the question – if it's a game it can't be English Literature. My criticisms of the game would be from a literary perspective. I think there are two weaknesses as a literary text – the limitations on character interaction: as he (student) taught me, you can read a character is lying from their facial gestures, that's Harry Potter-esque isn't it, where she drops in those big adverbs. There's a number of adverbs around the way Snape moves that tell you he's bad and I think L.A Noire is in that country with the exaggerated facial gestures. Secondly, just having looked at the opening to Things Fall Apart and what we were trying to discuss is what Achebe's trying to put across, you know in post-colonial literature, so what the writer is trying to communicate is very important in literature, you're not just searching for one meaning, but trying to uncover what the novel might be about. In the game, you have a much more active participation; as a reader you can determine the structure, you can digress to answer particular calls, you can't digress in a novel unless the author wants you to and that has a particular significance (Teacher – interview).

Novels and games are very similar in the way they portray both characters and setting (student – blog post).

Clearly, we do 'read' the text of the game in the sense that we have to de-code it through reference to what we already know of games like this one – but not in exactly the same way that we 'read' a novel or film. How we read these two is also different from each other – we do not 'read' a film exactly as we read a book. There are specific conventions and techniques appropriate to each medium, including the game. Yes we can read the game as well as reading a film or book, but not 'in the same way' in each case. (Teacher – interview).

> **"Our research was concerned with how students and teachers would relate this intervention to their ideas about texts, literature and subject identity."**

Work produced by a student participating in the Digital Transformations project.

"A much more collaborative approach to textual analysis began to emerge."

Work produced by a student participating in the Digital Transformations project.

Pedagogy

As boundaries around text types were challenged by this intervention, so too were institutional insulations between teacher and student and, more explicitly, expert and novice. These shifting roles were another constant element and it was far less straightforward as we might have expected. Some teachers were gamers, so didn't need to 'learn' in the same way as others. And during the analysis stage, the student-gamers didn't need to simply 'bracket' their gaming expertise to revert to student identity. During all phases, a much more collaborative approach to textual analysis, with a 'flattened hierarchy', not only of textual value but also of academic expertise, began to emerge, but when asked directly about how this could 'work' in the classroom and whether the teacher could function without having completed the game – and even the associated 'side missions', there was more variety in the responses:

Looking at the production/institutional background – why do Rock Star Games decide they want to get involved with this particular project, why don't they spend their time and money on another GTA? So those types of things you can do regardless of text because you've got some of these kinds of quintessential questions which don't go away about why do institutions behave as they do. So that side you could do without playing a game whereas as I say if you wanted to say 'here is L.A Noire, the character here is Cole Phelps so let's understand Cole Phelps,' well you'd need a lot of gameplay to stand up or sit down however you want to do it in front of a group of people and say 'Cole Phelps is this kind of person'. (Teacher – interview)

Teacher: *The way we did it was because we all had X-Box Live Gold accounts we were able to work at a distance because, first of all there wasn't many rooms available and we would have had to bring in an X-Box which would have been too complicated so we decided to do it all online mostly by meeting up in an evening time for an X-Box Live party chat and I don't know how you felt about that but I think it seemed to go okay, how about you guys?*

Student: *It certainly seemed to work and luckily it was mainly looking at a more theoretical talking point rather than anything else and for example the Tube Map activity – it was a lot more difficult to do the discussion on that when we were doing it through email, whereas where we were talking before it would be so much easier to do that sort of thing as an interactive whiteboard talk experience.*

Teacher: *It would have been better for us to have been in a room really and we suggested if we were going to do this as a bigger task that if someone has an interactive whiteboard and a class full of kids then do it live but also doing it as a spider diagram we said and we suggested that because we needed to be together to do it and my feeling was trying to do this underground map for me created a bit of a barrier because I couldn't really envisage it that way – I thought it would be better as a spider diagram.*

Student: *Yeah, this is more of an Art exercise more than anything.*

Well it's a little bit different with games in the sense that in one sense I was trying to rush through and get the story and find out the story so I didn't do any of the side visions as I was trying to get through the story but to cover everything and find all the un-lockable stuff you could be spending hours and hours on it so it is different in that sense because I know that you can read into a novel and if you read it front to back you can teach about it but with the game you can play it but to unlock everything you think you're going to be teaching about it I think that would take a lot longer. (Student – interview).

Implications

It's crucial to begin with what we do not claim to prove. These findings are surely not generalisable. English Literature students, teachers and videogames are different. In this regard, Selwyn's observation provides a helpful caveat:

Any changes, improvements or even 'transformations' are never consistent or straightforward and rarely turn out to be the inevitable and holistic improvements that some people would have us believe (Selwyn, 2010: 176)

In this case, two important specifics – firstly, L.A. Noire is very much a literary game which, like a novel, is very fixed. As one student commented, the game would be the same for 99% of all players. As such it is far from being a 'typical' videogame, if such a thing could exist any more than a 'typical' novel. Secondly, our relatively small sample of participants were volunteers, taking part in funded research with attendant incentives. The students were gamers who were also sufficiently interested in literature to be studying it. Our teachers were in some cases gamers but in others, sufficiently open to the transformation of the English Literature curriculum to take part. To draw more general conclusions, we'd need to develop this research to include a much larger sample on a less self-selecting 'pilot project' basis, without incentives and perhaps with more at stake – most obviously grades.

So, noting that such developments in the relationships between humans, technology and learning are rarely linear, our analysis needs to explore the complexity of these potential transformations, rather than draw hasty conclusions about an 'English 2.0'.

Both teachers and students were entirely comfortable with a collaborative approach to the learning, with the discussion over space and time arising from logistics for gameplay – as opposed to more straightforward novel reading – rather than any conservative notions of 'expert knowledge'. On this evidence, it appears that reading the game together and responding to it within the curriculum in a negotiated pedagogy is not especially challenging for the contemporary subject community, but the practicalities of the online learning and teaching context are.

In some teacher responses, including those above, there is rich data which brings to the surface the complexity of intertextual literacy and categories of reading practices. At the same time, one teacher above is clear that games cannot be literature but also presents a set of intertextual and comparative discernments about L A Noire and a related novel and play without the need to utilise distinct discourses. Going further, is it not the case that setting more active reading (of games) against less active reading but seemingly more intellectually demanding 'second-guessing' of Achebe's intentions reproduces the elements of 'schooled' reading practices that resist students' critical voices? This does not appear to be a knowing prejudice and the differences between the attractions of literature and gaming are discussed by the same teacher later in the response.

We can trace, in our data, a tangible distinction between teacher and student responses in relation to textual categories. The observation of 'blatant intertexts' and the hypothetical transcription into novel form seem to indicate a relaxed acceptance of a more 'horizontal' textual field. This may be explained by some teachers' needing to 'perform' their 'front-region' (Goffman, 1990) of being an expert. However, students shared the view that the teacher must have 'read' the game in full – *but to unlock everything you think you're going to be teaching about* – and that this presents logistical and time resource issues; so we suspect there are more complex and deep-rooted configurations of identity and 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1986) at work in English teaching than mere generational gaps, and these are far less likely to erode over time.

The broader impact of this research depends on English teachers downloading the study guide and working through it with students, whether a larger group of people come to study L A Noire as an authorless novel, and ultimately whether teachers go on to adapt the approach to other games. This would provide evidence that a larger scale study, perhaps inviting teachers to use the approach for different games, negotiated with students, would be worthwhile. To contribute to this process, follow these links, and if you use the materials or develop your own, please use the feedback option on the website to share your findings.

"Teacher responses bring to the surface the complexity of intertextual literacy and categories of reading practices."

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Links

All the research interviews can be found here: **http://cedare-reports.co.uk/digitaltransformations/feedback-from-participants/**

The *L A Noire* Study Guide can be downloaded here: **http://cedare-reports.co.uk/digitaltransformations/study-resources/**

The *L A Noire* wiki contains a range of fan-produced material: **http://lanoire.wikia.com/wiki/L.A._Noire_Wiki**

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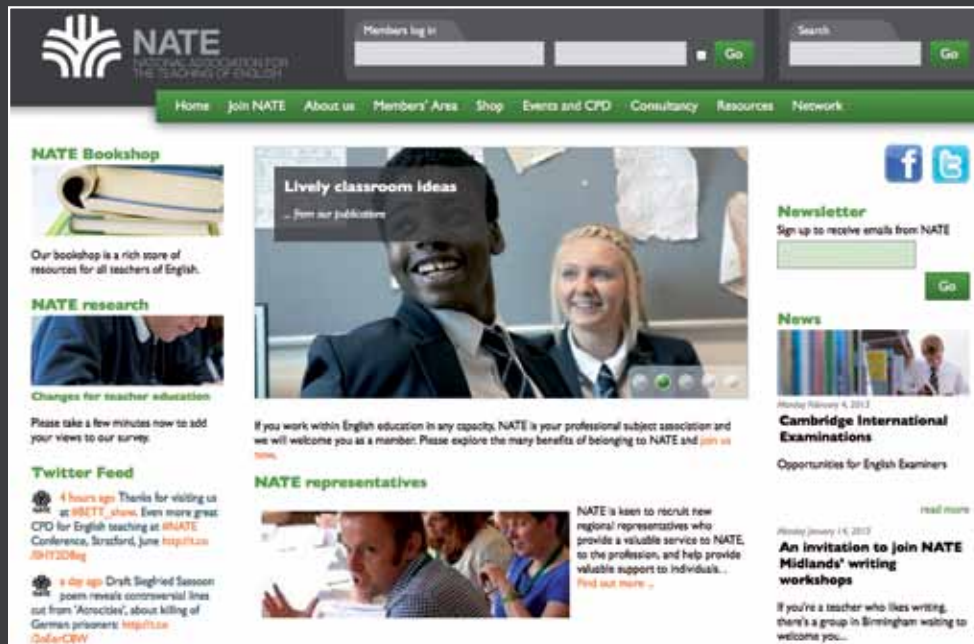**is Associate Professor at the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, Bournemouth University.**

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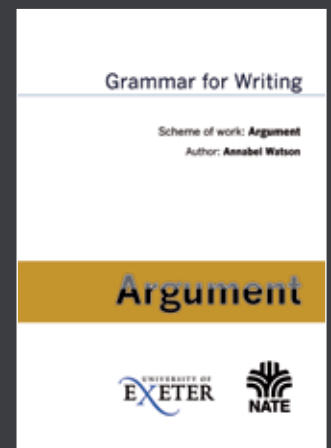
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