BIG DRAMAS second edition

Blast Off

TEACHER NOTES *by Anna McHugh*

Suitable	Suitable for Year 9
Difficulty	Text language ●●●●● Lesson concepts ●●●●●
Genre	Comic sci-fi radio play
Themes	Absurdity, authenticity, insecurity, machine hostility, boredom
Literary and dramatic techniques	Personification, anthropomorphism, sound effects, jargon and technological language, neologisms and nonsense words, irony, tone, hyperbole
Cast	8 speakers

Why choose this play?

Who hasn't thumped their computer and called it names? Or been convinced that the photocopier 'had it in for them'? This play shoots those insecurities into the far future in a comedy about a young man trapped on a spaceship with only three bored, neurotic, and supercilious machines for company. A short comic piece in the same vein as *Doctor Who* or *Red Dwarf*, the play slyly examines our interactions with machines, their developing 'personalities' in the new digital world, and the role and value we set on our uniquely human needs.

Practical considerations

Plan for 50 minutes to read through the text and around 100 minutes to set up and act it out. This lesson takes around 100 minutes to teach, including a class read-through of the play.

Teaching *Blast Off* by Sue Murray

Learning objectives

Students will:

- analyse how the playwright has personified machines and represented the human–machine interaction

- compare the digital characters in this play with those of other texts

- question the meaning and quality of human-machine interactions, and how they affect the problems of being human

- consider that authors dealing with new modes of being must develop new ways of representing them

- create an imaginative hybrid text, personifying three digital devices and imagining the interactions between them.

Meeting outcomes: Australian Curriculum—English

Year 9 content descriptions	Literacy: Interpreting, analysing, evaluating	ACELY1744	Use comprehension strategies to interpret and analyse texts, comparing and evaluating representations of an event, issue, situation or character in different texts.
	Language: Text structure and organisation	ACELA1553	Understand that authors innovate with text structures and language for specific purposes and effects.
	Literature: Creating literature	ACELT1773	Create literary texts, including hybrid texts, that innovate on aspects of other texts, for example by using parody, allusion and appropriation.
General capabilities	Information and Communication Technology (ICT) capability		Students develop ICT capability as they learn to use ICT effectively and appropriately to access, create and communicate information and ideas, solve problems and work collaboratively in all learning areas at school, and in their lives beyond school. The capability involves students in learning to make the most of the digital technologies available to them, adapting to new ways of doing things as technologies evolve and limiting the risks to themselves and others in a digital environment.
	Critical and creative thinking		Students develop capability in critical and creative thinking as they learn to generate and evaluate knowledge, clarify concepts and ideas, seek possibilities, consider alternatives and solve problems. Critical and creative thinking are integral to activities that require students to think broadly and deeply using skills, behaviours and dispositions such as reason, logic, resourcefulness, imagination and innovation in all learning areas at school and in their lives beyond school.

General capabilities	Ethical understanding		Students develop ethical understanding as they identify and investigate the nature of ethical concepts, values and character traits, and understand how reasoning can assist ethical judgment. Ethical understanding involves students in building a strong personal and socially oriented ethical outlook that helps them to manage context, conflict and uncertainty, and to develop an awareness of the influence that their values and behaviour have on others.
	Personal and social capability		Students develop personal and social capability as they learn to understand themselves and others, and manage their relationships, lives, work and learning more effectively. The capability involves students in a range of practices including recognising and regulating emotions, developing empathy for others and understanding relationships, establishing and building positive relationships, making responsible decisions, working effectively in teams, handling challenging situations constructively and developing leadership skills.

1. Approaching the text

Generating the sound effects noted in the script enhances the content of the play and the lesson, which is all about how digital entities communicate. If mobile phones are allowed in your classroom, make use of them to create sounds, or some of your students may be familiar with apps such as Garageband (free, and plenty of tutorials on YouTube).

Read the text around the class, giving plenty of expression to the comical digital characters.

2. Introducing ideas

i) Discuss how we're now accustomed to thinking of machines as 'real', or at least, as entities with which we can interact almost as fluently and meaningfully as humans.

Discuss the fact that Roger interacts as fluently with the digital characters as he would with a 'real' human one. When we read or hear this radio play, how do we think of the characters Computer, Panic Button, and P.O.D.? Are they just cues which foreground Roger's very human responses or are they characters with real agency?

Understanding activity

This idea of human and robot interaction brings out increasingly important questions, which students could discuss in groups and present as a brief article to the rest of the class:

- What makes a computer (or part of a computer, like a program) seem human? List the elements. For example, think about how you use a search engine such as Google. Do you interact with it as though it were a human? What elements in that interaction make you think this way?

- If this human aspect can be replicated undetectably by a machine, does this change our ideas about what's 'real' and what's not? If, for example, your animals die in a virtual farming game,

do you feel like a failure? Do you grieve? If not, why not? Can students extrapolate a definition of the 'real world' as opposed to an 'unreal world'—or should we come up with new terms altogether?

- Does it matter to us that we find human–machine interactions as enjoyable, important, and improving as human–human ones? Everyone can remember some film or graphic novel about a human–android relationship, but what's their opinion of that? Is it 'real' or a case of a human being anthropomorphising? Does it matter?

- If students gave a clear opinion about how they regarded the digital characters in *Blast Off*, ask them to think of other smart machines in literature, for example, HAL 9000 in *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Kryten and Holly in *Red Dwarf*, Marvin the Paranoid Android in *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, or the Tardis in *Doctor Who*. Do these 'proto-characters' have genuine agency, or are they simply elaborate plot-cues to foreground the human characters?

You might find that students know more about this than you—movies such as *A.I., I, Robot, Transcendence, RoboCop, Wall-E* and *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Her* all deal with these questions in a more or less explicit way, from 'what is 'real'?' to 'am I less of a person for falling in love with an android?'

ii) We often attribute personalities to machines or to aspects of machines such as programs, apps, functions, or modes.

Panic Button has a definite, if limited, personality. P.O.D. is a supercilious piece of machinery and even Computer is clearly at the end of his/her/its tether with Roger's low intelligence. When we interact with machines, we often react as though they had a personality. Designers of hard- and software spend a lot of time manipulating our emotional connection to digital elements, and try to give them a personality which will help us connect strongly with it.

Understanding activity

In groups, ask students to choose one of the digital characters and go back over its lines, and then present answers to the questions below. They can use a text-type associated with the digital world, for example, a user profile for Panic Button, or an Edmodo or Facebook page for P.O.D.

1. How would they describe its personality? They should present textual evidence for this.

2. Do the character's speech patterns have any distinct quirks which contribute to their personality? How, for instance, would they communicate in Twitter? It's quite a challenge to create a personality in 140 characters, but the resulting sound bite really reveals character.

iii) As we accept that there are new types of being, such as digital, robotic, or 'enhanced' human, we also develop new ways to represent them.

Imagine a writer's difficulty with these new types of character: how does a digital boyfriend show affection? Does a robot have bad dreams? How can an enhanced human enjoy 'time out'? Every writer who has dealt with a non-human character—from Spot the dog to Scarlett Johansson's computer program in *Her*—has had to come up with new ways of showing the things that human audiences want to see.

Understanding activity

Look back at the play and consider how the digital characters demonstrate things—such as frustration, boredom, or scorn—that human audiences want to see. Murray has only a radio-medium to convey these and she can't invoke gestures such as hitting, crying, or finger-pointing. What new language, dramatic or literary techniques does she use for each device? Remember, they must make the audience take the digital character seriously, but also recognise that they're fundamentally different. Students might consider:

- Use of sound effects to signal emotions (e.g. the jackpot noise, drum-roll, fanfare), either the character's own, or the ones they hope Roger will manifest.

- The genderless character—none of the digital characters has a specific gender. Which gender would students choose to read the lines? Female voices generally command faster, less

stressful responses (which is why emergency announcements, such as nuclear war warnings, were usually recorded by a woman—look at the 'Further reading' section for more information).

- Abundance of questions—because the computer has no (apparent) will of its own, it must keep asking prompting questions to maintain dramatic momentum.
- Absurd precision—the computer knows exactly how many games of checkers Roger has lost.
- Appearance—if this were a stage-play, what would this digital character look like (e.g. Kryten from *Red Dwarf* or HAL 9000's evil red light)?

If you wish, students could extend this activity to examine innovations made by another composer to convey the character of a digital being. An amusing list of characters can be found here.

3. The learning activity

Students should now have some ideas about human–machine interactions. They should understand that users' impressions of a machine's 'personality' are constructed either by designers for users, or by users in their interactions. They should also have a growing list of techniques which authors have developed to convey this personality.

Drawing on the activities above, students should compose a text titled 'A hard day's work'. It should be a conversation between an ordinary teenager's digital devices about what they've been put through that day, and their opinions about the user they're tied to and must serve. It can be in the form of a radio play, a cartoon, poem, or Skype chat.

For example: Ben's ATM card might be exhausted from use after a hard day's shopping, banging against all those paypass readers. His phone may be overworked with apps, all of which are receiving updates all the time, giving it a headache. His laptop might be sick of the software he's installed and the inane web-browser he uses, which interprets his existential angst—'what's the meaning of life'—with nonsense ('What's the meaning of Australia Day?'). All three might make bitter comments about his shallow, selfie-filled life and decide to teach him a lesson!

4. Rounding up

There are many more ways to take up the issue of 'digital humanity' and students should be encouraged to do so, in the most academic and creative ways. Ask students to state, in a single sentence, what they now think about human–machine interaction.

Further reading appropriate to Stage 5 that tangles with this problem is the fascinating novel *We* by John Dickinson (not the Russian novel of the same name by Yevgeny Zamiatin).

Assessment ideas

i) Pieces of software often have comical stereotypes associated with them, and we anthropomorphise (using the technique of personification) programs based on our experience with it (Internet Explorer comes in for a lot of stick, for example). Ask students to personify a program they use frequently, describing its physical appearance, personality, favourite activities and faults. Then give students the verbal stimulus, 'Good relationships don't change when upgrades come along.' Ask them to use this as the basis for an apostrophe (an address to an absent or unreal person or thing) between them as the user, and the program. They are explaining either that it's over because they're moving on to an upgrade, or affirming their loyalty despite the attractions of the upgrade. They should give reasons and try hard to convey a sense of the program's personality and their relationship with it.

ii) The Luddites were followers of Ned Ludd, who protested against the mechanisation of industry (particularly cotton mills) which was making thousands of handloom weavers redundant. Today the term 'Luddite' is (imprecisely) used for those opposed to technology (they have a website, incredibly). Students should write a persuasive piece in a pro-Luddite vein explaining why technology, such as the digital characters in the play, is dangerous, unbecoming, and unfit for humans.

iii) Students should use some of the techniques developed by Sue Murray and other digital-character creators to create a multimedia 'Computer's Defence'. The computer is sick of having to deal with dim users, constant upgrades, and the threat of obsolescence from the Luddite community. It hijacks the user's activity the next time she's using it and presents a defence of itself involving images, sounds, and hyperlinks. Students can present this through Prezi, PowerPoint, Voki, an animation program (there are free ones listed here) or another presentation program.

Using the play with other resources

It is possible to combine this play with other Macmillan resources if you have them in your collection. The exercises in the following workbooks provide useful warm-up activities with which to differentiate the concepts in this lesson. Students could attempt one or two of the exercises at home as a preparatory exercise for this lesson.

	National English Skills 9	Unit 7: So you want to be a writer, p84–5
		Unit 14: Genre, pp147–51
		Unit 16: Drama, pp166–67
	English Workbook 3 (3rd edn)	Unit 3: Short stories, pp110

Further reading

- A website discussing anthropomorphising websites, complete with cartoons which depict them.
- An article on Moe anthropomorphism.
- In 2012 'Eugene Goostman' (a computer program designed to simulate the conversational skills, style and content of a 13 year-old boy) very nearly passed the Turing Test. This is the benchmark test which determines the success of an artificial intelligence entity. Eugene convinced a third of his conversation partners that he was a real boy. Read more about Eugene here and about virtual gamers passing the Turing Test here.
- An explanation of why we companies use female voices more than male in recorded announcements.
- This article discusses emotion-manipulation in a virtual world.
- These two articles, on a man marrying a computer-game character and on robot girlfriends, discuss the Japanese subculture of robotics.
- An accessible and popular version of the simulation argument which students might enjoy (and is great for speculative fiction prompts) can be found here.

Linked texts

Blast Off could support and relate to the following Board of Studies prescribed texts for Stage 5 (among many others)

- *Journey through Horror*, edited by Richard Baines
- *Eva*, Peter Dickinson
- *Taronga*, Victor Kelleher

- *The Sterkarm Handshake*, Susan Price
- *Blackout*, Michael Pryor
- *Apollo 13* (PG), directed by Ron Howard
- *Katie.com*, Katherine Tarbox
- *Frankenstein*, adapted by Philip Pullman from the novel by Mary Shelley
- eidolon.net: Australian SF Online
- Schizm: Mysterious Journey

Acknowledgements