

Video Games and The Classroom

by

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BA, University of Victoria, 2011

MA, University of Victoria, 2019

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Abstract

This study explores the effects on student learning of the inclusion of video games within a Language Arts secondary school classroom. Video Games are often disparaged by both parents and educators as having a significantly negative impact on students' learning and productive use of time. However, previous studies surrounding youth and video games have revealed that youth engagement with games is often highly complex, involving deep critical thinking and encouraging of social engagement. New research has shown that, for some youth, video games can serve as a catalyst for further intrinsically motivated learning. In spite of this research, video games remain on the fringes of formal education. This study focuses on a month long unit where video games were used as a primary text within a grade 10 language arts class. The study makes use of an action research processes and is reported using case study approach. Using class observations, notes, and a series of group interviews with participants, four major themes emerged, namely: community, relevance, student engagement, and student success.

Key words: Language Arts, Curriculum, Pedagogy, Non-traditional literacies

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Chapter 1: Overview

Introduction

For many students school is broken. It is a place where their worst ideas about themselves are confirmed, by a system that is unable to recognize their distinct talents and passions. Student voice and choice, which is currently being heralded as the cornerstone of British Columbia's redesigned curriculum, is too frequently stifled once the bell rings and classes begin. Students are told to put away the things they are passionate about in order to focus on the 'necessities' of the classroom. Students' passions too often are viewed as distractions to, rather than facilitators of learning. Perhaps one of the most misunderstood passions of youth is the passion for video games.

Within this study I sought to explore the possibility of using video games as a means to teach English Language Arts in a secondary school classroom. The impetus for this study was born from my own personal experiences as a student, gamer, and emerging educator, as well as from my many conversations with students and other teachers.

How I got here

I was, as critics of video games are eager to point out, just sitting on my couch. I had not moved, save to feed myself, for two hours. The TV was on and I was holding desperately onto my XBOX 360 controller as I carefully moved my character up the stairs to Andrew Ryan's office door. I had only a week ago begun my teacher Education Program at the University of Victoria. My life was now busier than it had been for number of years. There were arguments to be made that there were other, more productive ways for me to be spending my time. Yet, I had chosen to play *Bio Shock* -- like a novel that you can't put down, I was hooked. I had spent numerous hours exploring the horrors of the underwater city of Rapture, the setting for *Bio*

Shock, and I was now moments away from coming face to face (virtually) with the game's main antagonist and creator of Rapture, Andrew Ryan. There were a few things I had been made keenly aware of over the hours I had spent playing *Bio Shock*. The first was how heavily the game drew on the literary works of Ayn Rand -- Andrew Ryan was a riff on the name Ayn Rand, and at times he would spout monologues that could have been lifted from Rand's *Atlas Shrugged*. Rand's literary philosophies that purport self-interest above all as the most important moral choice, were always controversial ("Ayn Rand", n.d.). *Bio Shock* takes Rand's philosophy of objectivism and pushes them to their most extreme end. It poses the question of what a world would be like if the only governing rule was self-interest, and the answers it provides to these questions are to me horrifying. The city of Rapture, wherein the game is set, is in ruins, the citizens have lost their minds, and violent acts occur with alarming regularity. The second was that *Bio Shock* was not content to merely reiterate the ideas of the literary works from which it was born; the game developers had some very clear and negative feelings about the major themes of Rand's work -- the game had its own point to make. The third thing was that as a medium this was a far more engaging way, for me, to explore these themes and ideas than the traditional texts, that influenced it, had raised. It was sometime during that evening that I became interested in the idea of using video games as texts in the secondary school classroom. This project began with the vague notion that video games could be studied in the same way that novels were, and that this exploration could occur in the classroom, using the same methods that were used to explore a novel. I decided that I would start to speak with students about the potential for this idea the next time I visited a high school as part of my Teacher Education Program.

It was when I began to talk to students about video games that the importance of finding a way to include them in the classroom became startlingly apparent. Students were engaging in complex, often literary tasks in relation to their video game playing. Students would tell me how they often read litanies of texts to better understand a game's fictional world. They volunteered essays and short stories they had written in relation to the games they had played, and they were able to discuss complex themes, ideas, and theories explored in the games they played. What I found was that once I began talking to students about gaming, I couldn't get them to stop. What was more striking was that although many of these students would write, read, and have heated discussions about video games, they remained ambivalent towards their schooling. Many of these students self-identified as "bad students" and considered themselves poor readers and writers. Some of them had trouble engaging in classes, and some had started to choose not to attend classes. These ideas and behaviors were at direct odds with what they were demonstrating when we would talk about video games. The students could demonstrate competence in all of the skills that were required of them from the English curriculum but they were unable to demonstrate the skills within the contexts of their English classes. Often times they did not recognize that they were capable writers, readers and thinkers. They had been told, again and again, that the experiences they had while gaming were of little value as they were seen as frivolous activities that would have little value in their education for modern day society. Video gaming, they had been told by their teachers, parents, and sometimes even their friends, was a waste of time. Conversely, the experiences they had had in the classroom, which were often negative, they had taken up as a barometer of their self-worth. It became clear to me that the narrative that had been thrust upon these students, i.e., that they were not 'good students', and that school was a place where their interests and passions had no place, had to

shift. Further, I suspected that the inclusion of video games within the classroom setting, in a meaningful and purposeful manner, could dramatically shift the narrative for many of these students. I began to see that video games could be one way in which to pull many students who were disengaged, and on the fringes of the classroom community, back into fabric of the classroom.

It was these experiences that led me to begin exploring the ways in which video games could be meaningfully included within the classroom. Over the past four years, both on my practicum and as a substitute teacher, I have brought video games into various classrooms across the Victoria School District. I have spoken with students, graduates, teachers, friends, and numerous youth about video games and the ways in which gaming has become a part of their lives. I have collected various stories and examples of the ways in which video games allowed for the exploration of complex ideas, facilitated the creation of community, and provided meaningful experiences for those who engage with them. These experiences served as the catalyst for this thesis. This study has helped me to further explore the ways in which video games can be used within the classroom in order to create meaningful experiences for students.

Creating The Project

In order to more fully explore the educative potential of video games within the classroom I decided it would be beneficial to create a teaching unit where video games were used as the primary texts within an English class. I had already done this on my first teaching practicum, but while the main focus of that experience was learning about myself as an educator, I wanted to shift the focus of this unit to the students' experiences. While I was aware of some of the effects that using video games had on student learning, the evidence I had collected was anecdotal and lacked focus. The key piece this time would be to create a space where evidence

could be collected and students would be afforded an opportunity to speak to their experience during the unit. Ultimately I understood that I would need a research question that could ground my project, providing my exploration of the use of video games in the classroom with a definitive focus. After numerous conversations, with students, my supervisor, and my mentor teacher, coupled with an exploration of previous video game studies, the question that came to me was: How does the inclusion of traditionally extramural literacies, specifically video games, within the classroom, facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success?

With my research question solidified I began to develop the teaching unit where video games were used as primary texts. Drawing on my experiences as an Education student, a substitute teacher, and my own experiences within the classroom, I began to develop a unit plan that utilized video games and could be used in a Secondary School English Language Arts Classroom. I drew on conversations with students, teachers, professors, and other gamers as I explored the possibilities of what using video games in the classroom could potentially look like. I used the British Columbia Curriculum for English Language Arts as an anchor for all my planning, continually establishing connections between different game titles and the prescribed learning outcomes. I began exploring the ways in which the core competencies outlined by the curriculum could be developed in class by using video games. As I planned the unit I became keenly aware of the many possibilities that the use of video games could have within the English Language Arts classroom.

With the help of a teacher mentor, my graduate supervisor, and some accommodating administrators I was able to find a place to teach the unit I had created. At the time I was a Teacher On Call- or a substitute teacher- having recently been hired by the Greater Victoria

School Board. At this point in my teaching career I would work for teachers when they could not be in their classes. Most of my teaching work at this point occurred at Quadra Secondary as I had completed both of my teaching practicums at that school. Subsequently, I had made significant connections with the teachers in the school and the administration. Quadra Secondary served as the site for this study due to the relationships I had forged there before I had begun my Graduate work. I was given the green light to delve more deeply than I had before into the potential educative benefits of using video games in the classroom. It is the experiences of teaching the unit, the voices of the students who were part of it, and my deep reflections on those experiences that constitute the remainder of this thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

There is something inherently thrilling about introducing video games into a classroom. The thrill is generated by the sensation that you are getting away with something. The students recognize it too; for a moment no one can believe it is actually happening.

“Are we really going to be playing video games? In class?”

“Wait until my Mom hears about this.”

School is not the place where things like this are supposed to happen. Students have been conditioned to believe that school is a place where the teacher has predetermined the outcomes of each class; a place where the correct answers lie in wait for those clever enough to find them; a place where grades are linked to their ability to create products like essays, tests, and projects. Schooling is, more often than not, a performance, not an exploration. One thing I have learnt, having used video games in the class on multiple occasions, is that news of what’s happening spreads around the school quickly. Other students begin stopping me in the halls, asking ‘if it’s true, if students were really playing video games in my class?’ The crux of this experience is that for so long, and even today, video games have been commonly seen at best as a distraction and at worst inherently dangerous. Video games are seen to be violent, misogynist, exploitive, time sucks. Video games have been blamed in the media for violent acts, decreasing attention spans, drug use, criminal activities, and numerous other societal plights. As early as 1991 Provenzo outlined four major concerns with regard to video game play, writing that video games: a) can lead to violent, aggressive behavior; b) employ destructive gender stereotyping; c) promote unhealthy “rugged individualist” attitudes; and d) stifle creative play (Provenzo, 1991 in Squire, 2001 p. 3).

These criticisms have served as recurring themes throughout the past two and half decades, being echoed by numerous periodical and news articles. There has been something almost shameful associated with video game play. As Tom Bissell (2010) points out, “solitary play can feel almost shameful, and we gamers have internalized that shame” (para. 3). In fact even now, when people find out that I myself play video games they are somewhat taken aback, “He seemed such a nice young man,” they will say. My video game play is incongruous with their understanding of my persona. And indeed that aspect of self, this compulsion to lock myself away and lose myself for hours on end in a video game world, has been a conundrum even to myself. Yet societal ideas of what video games are, and can be, is incomplete. Video games offer players a wealth of experiences that few other mediums afford. They are becoming increasingly complex, with branching narratives, and deep fully realized characters. Youth connect to video games, not because there is some inherent addictive quality that has mesmerized them and is controlling their lives, but rather because they provide full and rich experiences that satisfy a need for connection to character, world, and story, in a way that other mediums simply cannot match. So when I introduced video games into a learning space that is usually reserved for teacher-determined, product-driven activities, the response from students was immediate and dramatic.

Castell, Jensen, and Taylor (2007) point out that numerous studies have been conducted focusing on “player communities, individual game play, and the educative potentials of games” (p. 590). There is a large amount of excitement surrounding the potential that exists through the use of video games, specifically in the use of video games as a tool for learning. Schaffer, Squire, and Gee (2003) echo this excitement, saying that video games “have the potential to change the landscape of education as we know it” (p. 111). However, despite the multitude of

exciting possibilities and research surrounding video games, as noted by Burren, Hopper, and Sanford (2015), there is still a strong cultural narrative which denounces video games as a waste of time, and fails to see the inherent benefits that can arise from video game play. In fact it is rare to see teachers embrace gaming within the classroom and students are left to “navigate this realm of new media on their own.” (Burren, Hopper, & Sanford, 2015 p. 109). Much recent literature points to the many potential benefits of gaming. For example, Jenny, Schary, Noble, and Hamill (2017) point out that “playing computer games produces reductions in reaction times, improved eye-hand coordination, and can raise players’ self-esteem” (p. 724). Further Sanford, Star, Merkel, and Bonsor-Kurki (2015) point out that, “gamers have a wealth of experience...and are willing to engage in critical conversations about serious matters” (p. 103). In addition Gee (2007) highlights 15 principles of learning that video games incorporate, that range from identity formation and interaction, to systems thinking and distributed knowledge (p. 4-9). In spite of this educators remain hesitant to include video games within their classrooms or even to acknowledge that video games might have educative potential (Squire, 2005 p. 24). Video games are often seen by educators as a detriment to learning, and can even be seen as a real danger to youth and cognitive development. Indeed the American Medical Association Committee proposed the designation of video games as an addiction and mental illness in 2007 (Brown, 2008). Often media coverage of mass shootings establishes links between the perpetrators and the use of video games. There is a large amount of fear surrounding the increased influence video games have in our lives, and specifically the influence they have in the lives of youth and students. Much of this reluctance stems from educators’ lack of exposure to video games, as well as a lack of understanding of the potential for the inclusion of games within their classroom. Sanford and Bonsor-Kurki (2014) point out that: “Although educators

are aware of the negative impacts of video games they have limited insights into the benefits of working/playing with video games” (p. 30). The contradiction that exists between what the academic literature reveals about youth and gaming, and commonly held views of youth and video games speaks to a common problem in our society. Issues and problems that youth are facing are often ascribed as being a product of the popular culture in which they engage-- in this case video games-- and as a society we are reluctant to explore the idea that the systems of control – in this case our education system – may in fact be responsible for the difficulties our youth face.

Chapter Overview

Within this chapter I explore the changes occurring in the British Columbia School system that focus on student centered learning and, I argue, encourages adaptive and emergent teaching practices. Adaptive and emergent teaching practices recognize student interest and incorporate student voice into the design of classroom activities. I then highlight the philosophical underpinnings of student centered learning, which are at the heart of British Columbia’s new education plan (BC Curriculum Comparison Guide, 2017). Following this I examine the concept of multiliteracies and multimodalities as outlined by the New London Group (1996), Kress, Gee, and Knobel, and show how their work in understanding literacies connects to changes within British Columbia’s New Education Plan (BC Ministry of Education, 2016). Finally, I explore previous theoretical studies regarding video games, literacy, and education, and explore work that has occurred within the classroom.

The New Curriculum

As a Teacher on Call (substitute teacher) in Victoria I was able to visit many of the

English Language Arts classrooms across the Greater Victoria School District. Doing so gave me the false sense that there was a distinct set of regulations in place that held teachers accountable to teaching in a very set and specific manner. It seemed that teachers must surely be held to task for working through a progression of units of study centered on the novel, the poem, the play, poetry and poetic forms, and the essay. While there may be some divergence in the choice of play, or poems, or novels are studied, the skeleton of the classes would appear similar. This form of delivery for English Language Arts Classes, which has its roots in a colonial industrial education model, is actually not representative of the prescribed curriculum for British Columbia. Fu, Hopper and Sanford (2018) point out that many schools across the country exemplify an outmoded system which prioritizes individualized assignments, textbook driven tasks and exams (p. 267). Further, Fu, Hopper and Sanford (2018) highlight schools have not made significant changes from industrialized ways of thinking (p. 267).

The current curriculum, which is still evolving and shifting, outlines numerous goals for students who participate in the BC Language Arts K-12 Curriculum. These goals include that the student:

- become proficient and knowledgeable users of language, in all its forms, to achieve their personal, social, and career aspirations
- appreciate language and learning as lifelong sources of joy, curiosity, and passion
- think creatively, critically, and reflectively about language and texts as part of constructing and communicating personal meaning
- become critical and ethical users of digital media, capable of adapting to new modes and tools of language use (BC Ministry of Education, n.d. p. 1).

While this may sometimes be achieved by following the process listed above it certainly is not the only, or the most effective way to achieve the goals outlined by the curriculum. In fact it can be said that the archaic model that is still predominantly followed in many classrooms actually

damages our students, discourages intellectual curiosity, and leaves many students with a distinct sense of alienation from their own learning. Students become convinced that what they have to offer has no place within the school environment, that their knowledge is of little value, and that they do not belong within a classroom.

The curriculum in British Columbia has recently been drastically overhauled in order to provide educational experiences that are more relevant for students, and better connect them to the reality of their lives outside the classroom. Yet even before the current curriculum changes, a close examination of the previous prescribed learning outcomes revealed that there were no set restrictions related to texts to be studied in place for Secondary School English Language Arts teachers. The previous British Columbia Integrated Resource Package (2007) stated that:

The aim of English Language Arts is to provide students with opportunities for personal and intellectual growth through speaking, listening, reading, viewing, writing, and representing to make meaning of the world and to prepare them to participate effectively in all aspects of society. (p. 2)

Teachers were free to pursue these aims as they best saw fit. In some circumstances the use of the classical model of literacy education -- which is outlined by the New London Group (1996) as being restricted to reading and writing in “page-bound official forms of the national language” (p. 61) -- may have been appropriate as a means to provide “opportunities for personal and intellectual growth” in previous decades. Yet too often I would encounter students who were so disconnected from what was being offered in their classes that any opportunity for growth was unavailable to them. Even students who had found success in the more traditional classroom admitted that their in-class experiences had done little to help them “make meaning of the world and to prepare them to participate effectively in all aspects of society” (British

Columbia Ministry of Education, 2007 p. 2). It was clear that while more traditional teaching methods may have been convenient for teachers, it did little for many students.

In addition to the recognition that the traditional transmission model of teaching often fails to engage students meaningfully in their learning, the introduction of the new BC Education plan is bringing sweeping changes to the focus of the British Columbia curriculum. The new Education program being implemented across the province stresses the development of student centered learning and a focus on competencies for lifelong learning. The website for the new education plan states that:

BC's Education Plan is based on a simple vision: Capable young people thriving in a rapidly changing world. To achieve this we need an Education system that better engages students in their own learning and that fosters the skills and competencies they will need to succeed. The focus for this transformation is the movement to increasingly personalized learning, which is enabled and supported by quality teaching and learning, flexibility and choice, and high standards. (BC Ministry of Education, n.d. p. 1)

While the new curriculum acknowledges that the world is “rapidly changing”, and that the education system needs to better “engage students in their own learning”, it does not provide detail as to how teachers can adapt to this rapidly changing world and create relevant educational opportunities for their students. The impetus for developing these educational opportunities has fallen to the educators. This task is daunting, and discovering ways to personalize learning can often be overwhelming for teachers. However, by working with other teachers and students, teachers can begin to explore the ways in which their classrooms can more effectively meet the needs of their students, including providing choices in materials/texts and ways to represent their learning.

As educators begin to explore ways to “increasingly personalize learning” and to “better engage students in their own learning,” the meaningful inclusion of alternative literacies such as video games within teacher’s pedagogies and classrooms will open avenues for greater student success for all.

Student Centered Learning

If the current competency-based curricular model advocating personal learning is to be adopted in British Columbia classrooms there must be a pedagogical shift in all classrooms from a teacher centered model, to a model which privileges the student’s learning, essentially the student’s ability to know, understand and do. The shift from an expert transmission model where the “teacher is the dispenser of knowledge, arbitrator of truth, and the final evaluator of learning,” to a transformational model where the teacher is a facilitator of learning and “both students and teachers are invited to discover their full potential as learners, as members of society and as human beings,” can be daunting for some educators (Johnson, 2005, p. 1). Shifting the locus of authority from the teacher to the student asks the educator to occupy a space of vulnerability. However, a classroom that is founded on student-centered learning requires a teacher to be willing to share their power and authority with students as they develop the skills to take responsibility for their own and their peers learning. Paulo Freire (1988) recognized the inherent power of the learner and the necessity of educators being mindful of the learners’ experiences (p. 70). Freire (1988) points out that, “Educators need to know what happens in the world of the children with whom they work...what they know independently of the school, and how they know it” (p. 72). Without this understanding learning cannot be expected to occur within a classroom space. In challenging the assumption that the teacher is the main source of knowledge within the class, Freire acknowledges that, “teaching cannot be a

process of transference of knowledge from the one teaching to the learner. This is the mechanical transference from which results machinelike memorization” (1998, p. 22). The idea of a democratic school that Freire speaks of insists on a balance of power within the classroom, between teacher and student, and indeed extends the necessity of this balance to the entire school. But as other scholars have pointed out, there still exists a tension in schools between, “the mechanistic positivist account of learners as recipients of hardwired knowledge and the accounts of learners as situated active knowledge constructors” (Liu & Matthews, 2005, p. 387). Without fully acknowledging the inherent wisdom of the learners, meaningful education cannot exist. Although, Freire’s ideas originated in the 1960’s and many educators purport to be familiar with and support his ideas, finding evidence of his ideas being supported by classroom activities is difficult – especially in British Columbia classrooms I have experienced.

Social Constructivism in relation to video games

Social constructivism is a sociological theory of knowledge according to which human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008). By this view we see that individuals seek coherence with others and their understanding of the world in which they live and work.

Video game play is often viewed as a solitary activity. Stereotypes abound regarding the video game player as a loner, isolating in a room somewhere, staring at a screen for hours on end, eschewing social interaction (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, Gee, 2005, p. 105). This vision, of the solitary isolated gamer, has taken hold in our collective unconsciousness. While it is true that some ‘gamers’ do elect to isolate or withdraw from society from time to time, the reasons for choosing to spend many meaningful hours away from other people and instead with the company of video games often has less to do with the addictive and socially destructive nature

of video games, and more to do with a lack in the real world. Jane McGonigal points out that for gamers, “the real world increasingly feels like it’s missing something” (p. 4). Thus, gamers may often times retreat to the world of games, a place more accepting of who they truly are, and far more engaging than what is being offered in other facets of their lives. Jane McGonigal (2011) states in her book “Reality is Broken” that, “The real world just doesn’t offer up as easily the carefully designed pleasures, the thrilling challenges, and the powerful social bonding afforded by virtual environments. Reality doesn’t motivate us as effectively. Reality isn’t engineered to maximize our potential” (p. 45). Thus gamers who are disenfranchised by the world in which they live will often find that video games provide much more meaning in their worlds than their everyday lives. McGonigal (2011) rightfully points out that, “video games are currently fulfilling genuine human needs that the world is unable to satisfy” (p. 4). This can be especially true for students, as North American educational systems often struggle with student motivation and engagement (Lee & Hammer, 2011, p. 2). Many students who feel little connection to in school activities are turning more and more to alternative pursuits, popular among these is video games that fulfill their craving for learning experiences and exciting challenges.

While the stereotype of the isolated gamer may persist in some circles, it is clear that gamers that they are not as socially isolationist as the stereotype would suggest (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, Gee, 2005, p. 106). Shaffer et al. (2005) point out that many video game players are not isolationist, but that video game play can be a “thoroughly social phenomenon” (p. 106). This is most evident in massive online multiplayer games where thousands of players are connected with one another at the same time (Shaffer et al, 2005, p. 5). In fact video games often encourage social interaction either through competition or co-operation. Shaffer et al. (2005) go further, pointing out that, “school often sequesters students from one another and

from the outside world, while games bring players together” (p. 105). This aligns with the social constructivist premise of learning that Kim (2006) outlines as a “social process...that occurs when humans are engaged in social activities” (p. 3). Further, Kim (2006) points out that in the context of social constructivism, “individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other” (p. 3). Kim’s definitions of Vygotsky’s central premises of social constructivism connect to the learnings that can occur for gamers through their video game play. Shaffer et al. (2005) points to the gaming community that has been created surrounding the game *Civilization* as an example of how player created communities support the constructivist formation of knowledge and learning. Within the game of *Civilization* a shared system of communication and knowledge is constructed through interaction, not in isolation. This aligns with the key idea of social constructivism outlined by Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2006) that systems allow social beings to communicate, and that truth is social (p. 33). Shaffer et al. (2005) highlight that:

In the various websites devoted to the game *Civilization*, for example, players organize themselves around the shared goal of developing the skills, habits, and understandings that are necessary to become experts in the game. At Apolyton.net, one such site, players post news feeds, participate in discussion forums, and trade screenshots of the game. But they also run a radio station, exchange saved game files in order to collaborate and compete, create custom modifications, and, perhaps most unusually, run their own university to teach other players to play the game at deeper levels (p. 106-107).

In this example we see how the computer game *Civilization* touches on the three systems of organization that enable social interaction as outlined by Davis, Sumara and Luce-Kapler (2008) : “multiple levels of organization (e.g., individual learners, online communities, society), co-specifying dynamics (e.g., between teachers and learners, between knowledge and action)

and complex associations (e.g., among people, among ideas)” (p. 32). In this example it is clear that learning in video games is socially constructed, and that meaningful and deep understandings of the game are a product of social interactions. Further, this kind of example is not exclusive to the game *Civilization*. My conversations with students and video gamers prior to this study has shown me that there are numerous online, and local communities that have been created in connection with many video game titles. These communities are integral to the understanding and enjoyment of most of the video game titles. Overall (2007) points out that for social constructivists, “knowledge of the material world becomes reality not through the discovery of objective truths or facts, but through intersubjective socialization and constructed understanding” (p. 75). These ideas help to understand the way learning occurs in communities of gamers, and how meaning and knowledge are constructed through communal video game play. Shaffer et al (2005) point out that, “games bring together ways of knowing, ways of being, and ways of caring: the situated understandings, effective social practices, powerful identities, and shared values that make someone an expert” (p. 107). Video games ask players to work with one another in order to meet their challenges, and further encourage a unique style of community building. Video gamers often make sense of their gaming experiences by talking about them with each other. Gamers will share stories, compare notes, and provide each other with helpful advice in order to fully make sense of any video game that they are playing (Sanford & Bonsor-Kurk, 2014, p.31). These experiences run in contrast to the isolationist model that is still present in many school environments. The isolationist model often ignores students’ social realities and seeks to teach skills out of context without considering the factors that influence the students’ abilities to learn; the isolationist model ignores the reality of how students learn (Overall, 2007, p. 78). The experiences of the student, and the community that the

student engages with, is what dictates how students construct their understandings of the world in which they live. Video games are, for many students, an integral aspect of their lives, and serve as the main community with which they interact.

Multi Literacies

Historically, literacy has often been thought of as a singular entity, consisting of reading and writing (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009, p. 31). Cope and Kalantzis point out that, “by the mid 1990’s the emphatic and singular connotation of the word ‘literacy’ was beginning to work not-so-well” (2016 p. 1). The advent of the internet and mass media meant that conventional and narrow understandings of the word literacy were becoming anachronistic. The New London Group (1996) pointed out that with globalization and increased local diversity there came an increased disparity in the way meaning was constructed. Meaning making occurs not just through traditional text, but is also deeply connected to the, “visual, the audio, the spatial, [and] the behavioural” (New London Group, 1996, p. 64). In fact the New London Group (1996) outlined six specific elements of the meaning making process: “Linguistic Meaning, Visual Meaning, Audio Meaning, Gestural Meaning, Spatial Meaning, and the Multimodal patterns of meaning that relate the first five modes of meaning to each other” (p. 65). These elements, along with the social and cultural differences of individual experience, constitute the basis of the term multiliteracies (p. 62). Cope and Kalantzis (2016) point out that multiliteracies recognizes that literacy and meaning making can be contingent upon “culture, gender, life experience, subject matter, and social domain” (p. 3). The work of the New London Group allowed for a reconsideration of the narrow definition of literacy as connected only to the culturally dominant language, and demonstrates the necessity for new a new conception of literacy that is multifaceted and more representative of the individual experience. The

implication of this information for educators is that there needs to be an expanded focus on literacy development from the singular canonical written text to an expanded recognition of multiliteracies and multimodalities, to systems that students use to share and make meaning.

Kress (2003) points out that:

It is no longer possible to think about literacy in isolation from a vast array of social, technological and economic factors. Two distinct yet related factors deserve to be particularly highlighted. These are, on the one hand, the broad move from the now centuries long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen. These two together are producing a revolution in the uses and effects of literacy and of associated means for representing and communicating at every level and in every domain. (p. 1)

In response to this, members of the New London Group not only explored the reconceptualization of our idea of literacy, but also developed a pedagogical framework for teaching literacy: a pedagogy of multiliteracies (See: Cope, 2016, Kalantzis, 2016, Gee 2007, Kress, 2004). This pedagogy of multiliteracies directly addresses the ‘how’ of multiliteracies, and can be connected to the ideas of B.C’s New Curriculum, and more specifically to some of the foundational ideas behind using video games as texts within the classroom. Cope and Kalantzis (2016) outline the three major tenants of multiliteracy pedagogy as: situated practice, critical framing, and transformed practice (p. 4). Of these tenants the most clear connection between my study and the pedagogy of multiliteracies can be found in situated practice. Situated practice recognizes that human cognition is contextual, and that “meanings are

grounded in real-world patterns of experience, action, and subjective interest” (Cope & Kalantzis, 2016, p. 4). The recognition that literacy is inherently multifaceted, and that meaning making is connected to real world experiences and subjective interest, allows for the exploration of video games as a legitimate pedagogical tool. In fact the inherent multimodality of the video game, in conjunction with it being a real world experience directly connected to the subjective interests of the student, suggest that attention must be paid to video games as a key element of literacy pedagogy.

Games and Literacy

The work of the New London Group and others has shown that literacy can no longer be considered only in terms of reading and writing. There exist multiplicity of literacies, with which educators must pay attention. Gee (2007) points out that a “crucial step in promoting student engagement is to rethink literacy for the 21st Century” (p. 6). As educators begin to think of ways to recognize the various multiliteracies, and incorporate multimodalities into their classrooms, attention should be paid to the use of video games as literacy texts. Gee (2007) points out that, “literacy is inherently multi-modal and is tied to images, sounds, texts, and movement” (p. 6). Video games, with which nearly 70 percent of North American youth engage, (Crecnte, 2018) are comprised of the kind of multimodality that Gee specifically outlines. Connections between video games and their potential as literacy sites have already been made. Sanford and Bonsor- Kurki (2014) point out that there is “significant literacy learning for youth through their (often extensive) engagement with videogames” (p. 33). Sanford and Bonsor-Kurki (2014) further highlight that these literacy learnings include, “facility with multi-modal texts, accessing information from diverse symbol systems (graphics, charts, images, maps) in addition to the many alphabetic text messages represented on screen” (p. 33).

Shaffer et al. (2005) point to the fact that games allow players, “to think talk and act in new ways.” (p. 105). In addition they allow for gamers to “inhabit roles that were otherwise inaccessible to them.”(p. 105). Further, studies of video game players have demonstrated that video gamers develop traditional literary analysis skills through game play. Sanford and Bonsor-Kurki (2014) have noted that participants demonstrated a “deep engagement with narrative and a subsequent critical understanding of narrative as a result of videogame play” (p. 33). Further, “they examined the integrity of the story and the characters within the story ensuring they were believable in the context of the narrative”, and they “explored the backstory, looking for consistency between the ongoing story and previous story elements” (p. 35). These skills -- deep engagement with narrative, a critical exploration of character and story, and intertextual comparison between current and previous narratives -- are representative of high level critical literary analysis. Although these skills have been developed using the non-traditional medium of video games, they are traditional literary skills that are often stressed within the secondary language arts classroom. Yet despite this educators are often hesitant to include video games as part of their classroom experience. Shaffer et al (2005) point out that “for some educators, it is hard to see the potential benefit of games because these virtual worlds are not about memorizing words definitions or facts” (p. 107). So while a link between the potential pedagogical value of video games as literacy learning tools has been established, few studies have focused on using video games as a literary tool within the classroom.

Video Games and Education

It has been reported that nearly seventy-five percent of adolescents in North America play Video Games (Drummond & Sauer, 2014, p. 1). Generally video game play has been viewed as a hindrance to youths’ education, as teachers and parents are often dismissive of

video games and their influence in youths' lives (p. 1). At best, video games are seen as a distraction, but often they are seen as damaging to the lives of youth. Squire (2001) points out that educators fear that video games may “foster violence, aggression, negative imagery of women, or social isolation.” (p. 2). However, some educators and researchers have noted the captivating nature of video games and have sought to harness that within their classrooms (Squire, 2001, p. 2). As early as 1982, Bowman noted that the motivational elements of popular video games could be introduced into classroom lesson design (as cited in Squire, 2001, p. 4). Ideas surrounding the structural and motivational elements of video games being transcribed to classroom practice have continued to evolve, with recent developments in the trend of gamification having a significant impact on many educational studies (Dicheval, Dichev, Agre, Angelova, 2015, p. 1). Gamification is defined by Dicheval et al. (2015) as, “the use of game design elements in non-game situations.” (p. 1). The use of the mechanisms of games, and specifically video games, in the classroom as starting place for designing more engaging learning environments has been studied extensively (Squire, 2001, p. 3). However, it is not only the design elements of video games that have found their way into educational settings. Video games themselves have been used in educational, and training situations for decades (Squire, 2001, p. 3). Squire points out that video games and simulations have been used in the “U.S military, schools, and industry for learning.” (p. 4). Commercial games are used in the military for eye hand coordination, and “edutainment games”, such as SimEarth, and Railroad Tycoon, have been used in K-12 classrooms (Squire, 2001, p. 4). Thus, while some critics worry about the effects of video game play on youth, many educators and researchers have begun to explore ways in which to incorporate video games into classroom practices (Squire, 2001, p. 8).

However, while design elements and some video games have been brought into classrooms, there have been few studies in which video games have been used as a primary text -- fewer still have been done where students study contemporary, commercial games. Squire (2001) points out that “interactive fiction and online games are two areas that have not been studied much at all” (p. 23). This is in spite of the fact that many researchers (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2001) have noted the inherent literary qualities of video games. Squire (2001) notes video games now have rich interactive narratives, and deep character development (p. 31). Gee (2003) points out that video games, encourage youth to make connections between the game, other media texts and the world (p. 1). Beavis (2014) highlights that video games are, “dense multilayered and intertextual” (p. 435). Further, Ostensen (2013) rightly points out that, “the games of today have come to rely more and more on the elements of fiction in their design, and they represent unexplored territory in studying the nature and impact of narrative.” (p. 72). Sanford, Hopper, and Burren (2016) have demonstrated the intertextual and inherently literary elements of video games. It would seem logical that video games could serve as a pedagogical literacy tool. Ostensen, explores this potential arguing that, “as they [video games] have become more mainstream, many have suggested a place for video games in the English classroom— authors in the pages of this journal have argued that video games can boost problem solving skills and enhance reading skills, that video-game-based books can serve as bridges to other reading, and that games can help teach students about social issues (2013, p. 71). Ostensen here establishes a clear correlation between video games and fiction, arguing that video games can be used as a means to develop critical literacy skills and potentially serve as a springboard towards “other reading.” Ostensen (2013) further points out that, “There’s a place for a purposeful study of video games in today’s English classroom because they represent some of

the most important storytelling in the 21st century. This new medium is not only connected to our students' lives and interests but also represents our society's efforts to push the boundaries of storytelling in meaningful ways." (p. 72). While the potential to use video games as literary tools has been established, examples of video games being used as such in a classroom are still few.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this study I utilized qualitative case study method of inquiry. In this section I outline the reasons for adopting a qualitative methodology for this study, and discuss the particular methodologies that were adopted, these being action research and descriptive case study. Finally I describe the methods I used and discuss my choice for using focus group interviews as well as class observations.

Considering that the goal of this research was to privilege student experience and voice, the adoption of a qualitative research model was imperative. As Sparkes (2002) points out, “the philosophical assumptions and interests that drive qualitative forms of inquiry are different from those that inform research conducted in positivist, and post positivist paradigms” (p. 39). Within a qualitative model of research, subjects are referred to as participants and granted “the ability to talk back, have their own opinions, and even constitute their own representations” (Woolgar as cited by Sparkes, 2008, p. 89-90). The epistemological assumptions that are posited by a qualitative research model insist on the creation of understanding through a meaning making process based on participants’ insights expressed through actions and explanations. Within a qualitative research model the participants’ agency is recognized. Conversely, quantitative research will often treat participants as objects, denying them voice other than that it can be expressed through the measurement tools created by the researcher. Given this, it seemed appropriate and desirable to utilize qualitative research methods in order to understand student experience within a high school classroom.

Research Design

In this study I used an action research process within a case study research model. The study was situated in a Grade 10 English Language Arts Class where video games were used as

the primary text. The teaching unit took place over a one-month period in which I acted as a teacher researcher. During the unit I made detailed class observations at the conclusion of each day as shown in figure 1. At the conclusion of the unit I interviewed the student participants in focus groups. The audio recordings of the focus group interviews were then transcribed and analyzed using descriptive analysis techniques.

Teacher Activity	Student Activity	Student Interaction	Reflections on Student Activity and Interaction

Figure 1 Sample of teacher notes template as research artifact

Case Study

Case study is defined by Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1984) as a “detailed examination of a single example” (p. 34). By examining a single case in detail it the intent is that the researcher can make broader generalizations and develop deeper understandings about the subject of the case study as a whole example of the particular phenomena under study. I felt that to assess the effectiveness of the inclusion of video games within the high school classroom, my study needed to involve directly using video games within a high school classroom. A case study is always situated in a “real life context”, and seeks to “explore the

complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, or system” (Simmons, 2009, p. 21).

Case Study methodologies became particularly prominent in the 1970’s, when extensive research on new curricular programs in Education found that the traditional quantitative methods were inadequate in accurately representing the complexities of new educational projects (Simmons, 2014, p. 1). Generally, a case study focuses on a single case -- in this instance the case was my use of video games to teach English over the course of one month in a Secondary English Language Arts classroom -- and data is collected in order to provide an “in depth view of the policy or program as it is implemented in a specific context” (Simmons, 2014, p. 3). Further, understandings are often generated through relations, with the experiences of the researcher and the participants serving to generate the findings. In addition, case studies are often focused with regard to their scope -- they tend to examine a single case in depth as opposed to a large sampling of the population (Simmons 2009, p. 2). This particular fact served my study as case study is both pragmatic and also allows for an in-depth complex analysis of the phenomenon. Therefore I used a model of study that borrows from the case study methodological tradition. As I want to explore the ways in which the inclusion of video games in one classroom allowed for different student experiences from traditional text based language arts classrooms, engagement that may be different from typical language arts classrooms, and the creation of a different type of classroom community, the use of the case study was appropriate methodology.

This case was immersive, though it was not long-term. The study took place for the length of time needed to complete a single unit within a Secondary Humanities class, approximately one month. Further, as I was teaching/ facilitating the unit, the traditional objective non-participant observer that is employed more objective focused case studies was not

employed here. I was directly involved in the study as both a researcher and a participant. Finally, this case study drew from action research as it was situated within a real world situation--the classroom—and aimed to solve a real world problem—how to effectively incorporate student interest inside a classroom environment.

Action Research

Action research involves a commitment that follows Kemmis and McTaggart's (1982) criteria with a focus upon "(1) the improvement of practice; (2) the improvement of the understanding of the practice by its practitioners; and (3) the improvement of the situation in which the practice takes place" (p. 84). As noted by Kemmis and McTaggart the process of action research typically focuses on negotiated planning focused on the cycles of the plan, implementation, observation, reflection, and re-planning. Educators often use action research as it allows for, "a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action" (Sagor, 2001, p. 1). Sagor (2001) further points out that educational action research enables educators to "be more effective in their teaching and the development of their students" (p. 1). Action research takes place "within real world situations, and aims to solve real world problems" (O'Brien, 1998, para. 16). Action research is often conducted by the individuals who are working in a particular field. It is a popular method for specific educational studies, allowing educators to conduct and participate research within their own classrooms and schools. Sagor points out that regardless of who is conducting the research the action research process engages in the following the eight steps:

1. Selecting a focus
2. Clarifying theories
3. Identifying research questions

4. Collecting data
5. Analyzing data
6. Reporting results
7. Taking informed action (2001, p. 2)
8. Repeat Steps 3-7

The key idea in these steps is an emerging insight on the phenomena being researched as the researcher engages with the participants. Further, the role of a critical friend is often used in action research, and was used in this study. Dr. Kathy Sanford provided insights into the research process, and pointed out aspects of the study I would have missed. This process connects to the joint activity and shared meaning making implied by the social constructivist approach to learning.

The cyclic nature of the action research model is well suited to the needs of this study as it captures the negotiated process with the students I went through as the teacher exploring the implementation of video games as texts in the language arts classroom. I conducted this study as a practitioner of the work I was researching. While conducting the research for this study I was also teaching the class that I was researching. In fact it was imperative that I found a research model that afforded me the opportunity to both teach and conduct research in the same space simultaneously. The action research model afforded me this opportunity. The case study that then emerged was of this action research process and my students response to the video games as texts in my language arts class.

Therefore, situating my research within a secondary school Humanities class allowed me to directly explore the ways in which the inclusion of video games affected student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and the realization of the prescribed learning outcomes as

outlined by the British Columbia curriculum. Further, it allowed me to implement and assess the effects of using video games in the classroom following the cyclical model of action research.

With the release of the new British Columbia curriculum, teachers have been required to shift their pedagogy from a teacher transmission model to a student-centered approach that authentically incorporates student interests in attempts to personalize their learning. While this is being stressed as important, there are few documented models for teachers to draw on. The inclusion of video games within the classroom is born out of a desire to authentically incorporate student interest within the secondary classroom. Using an action research model to investigate both the effectiveness and the challenges that are faced when using video games within the classroom, allowed for an in-depth exploration of how the inclusion of video games within the classroom can facilitate student learning. In particular the study considered student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and fostering of student success.

Research process and analysis

I used video games as the primary text within a high school classroom over the course of a one-month unit. The unit of study occurred within a grade 10 English Language Arts class. As the study itself only occurred over the period of a single unit of study, and not over the entirety of the course it was not necessary to cover all of the learning standards, ideas and competencies outlined by the British Columbia English language arts 10 curriculum. Teachers in British Columbia are required to address all of the learning standards, and Big Ideas that are prescribed by the British Columbia curriculum throughout the course of a semester. Courses are to be designed by teachers to ensure that these outcomes are being met. The figure below shows the big ideas that are to be covered in an English language arts 10 class:

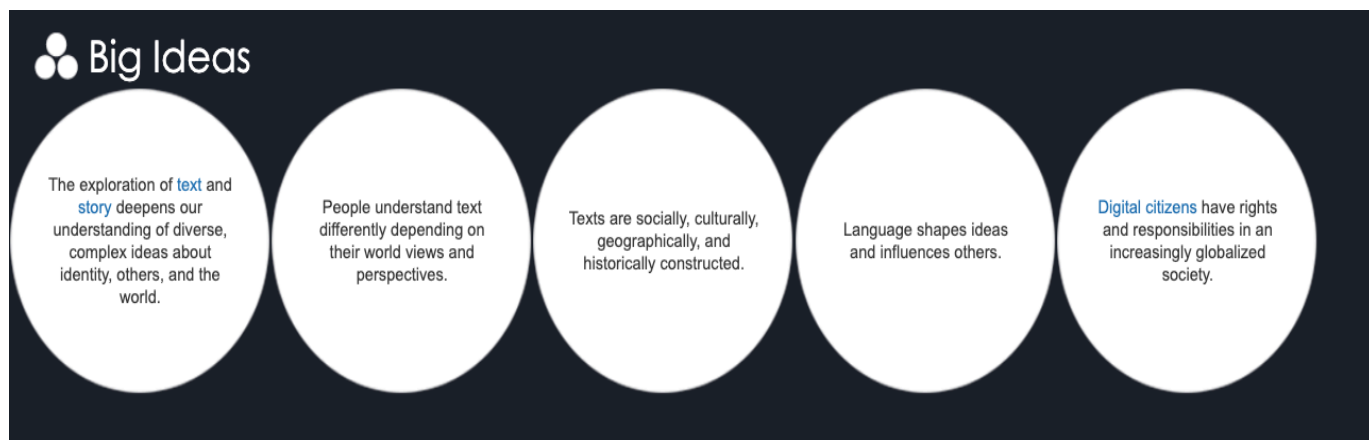


Figure 2 “Big Ideas”

However, the methods that teachers use in order to address how these learning standards and big ideas are being met is not prescribed. Educators in British Columbia are free to address these outcomes however they see fit. For this study I focused my attention only on the events and experiences that occurred over the unit of study wherein video games were used. In addition to the Big Ideas, and learning strategies that are outlined within the British Columbia curriculum it is important to note the core competencies. The competencies are to be taught in every class, and built throughout a students’ k-12 school experience. The following figure outlines the three core competencies that are the focal point of the new British Columbia curriculum:

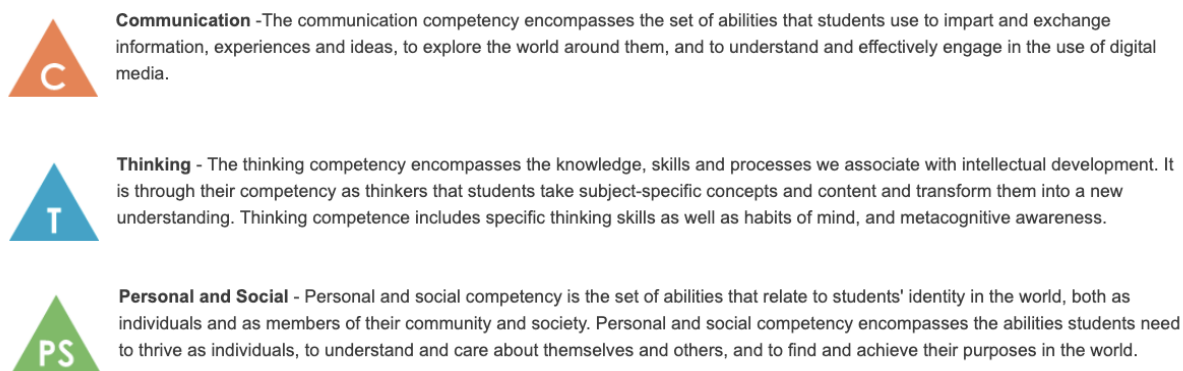


Figure 3 “Core Competencies”

I chose to use detailed class observations, focus groups, and descriptive analysis in order to understand how video games effect student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success. Using class observations allowed me to adopt the dual role of educator and researcher. Being in the classroom everyday allowed for a greater understanding of what was occurring for students. The day-to-day observations were necessary in order to make sense of emerging themes and trends during the study. Though I was occupying the dual role of educator researcher I was able to collect vital information from my in class observations. I observed the way students interacted with one another, the ways in which they engaged with the medium of video games, and the ways in which they engaged in group discussions. While students' own reporting on their experience is useful, there are many understandings that could not have been gleaned had I not used observations. By attending deeply to what I saw going on around me I could begin to form a more comprehensive picture of what was happening for the students who were part of the study. The students that were part of the study were from a grade 10 English language arts class at Quadra Secondary School. The class was taught by another teacher in the district who I often worked for as a substitute teacher. I chose to focus my study within the class as I had built a trusting relationship with the teacher of the class, and the administration of the school. On the first day of the study I explained the nature of the study and then had another teacher distribute permission and consent forms. I did not know which students were and were not part of the study, and students were informed that they could withdraw from the study at anytime. However, the observations only allowed understanding from a single perspective, my own. Therefore it became necessary to find ways to allow students to communicate their experience during the study. I chose to use focus group interviews as opposed to singular interviews, as my observations had led me to understand that

students were making sense of the unit in relation to one another. Learning was occurring in the class in a co-creational manner, and therefore I felt it best to allow students to share and reflect on their experience in groups. The use of focus group interviews within groups of 2, 3 or 4 ensured that student voices became a central tenant of the study, as opposed to a peripheral consideration. Finally I chose to use descriptive analysis in order to make sense of both my class observations and the students' responses to the focus groups. The use of descriptive analysis allowed me to unpack the meanings, trends, and themes that emerged from my findings, and to make sense of how those findings contributed to answering my research query, how the incorporation of video games in the classroom can facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success. By combining my class observations, with student focus groups, and using descriptive analysis to make sense of my findings, I was able to gain a more complete understanding of how the incorporation of video games in the classroom can facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success.

Categories and Themes

Part of my research process and analysis involved recognizing emerging categories within the study, and using those categories to organize groups. Later I analyzed the data within the categories and was able to identify themes that helped me to make sense of the study. Themes refer to “any **principle** recurrent in a number of domains, tacit or explicit, and serving as a relationship among subsystems of cultural meaning” (Spradley, 1980, p.141) While categories are less complex and emerge while collecting data, and upon initial analysis.

In the next section I outline the particular context for this study. I describe the setting in which the study took place, provide information about the participants, describe the methods of data collection, and explain the unit I taught.

Context

The three main contexts for this study include the grade ten class in which the study took place, and myself-as teacher/researcher. I am part of the context for this study as I was teaching the class and researching class at the same time.

Quadra Secondary

Quadra Secondary is a school within the Victoria School District that attracts a cross section of students from various socio-economic backgrounds, although the majority of students could be said to come from middle or upper middle class homes. Twenty percent of the student population is currently made up of international students, and the remaining eighty percent of the population is drawn from the Greater Victoria area.

As with many public school classes in the province the class in which I undertook my study was composed of students from a variety of backgrounds with drastically different ability levels and interests. One of the most distinct features of the class was the number of international students that were enrolled in the class. English was a second language for nine of the twenty-five students within the class. While some of the students for whom English was a second language were proficient and confident with English, many of them found the use of the English language to be a barrier both for engaging with class material and engaging with their peers. As such, many of the international students had chosen to associate primarily, and in some instances solely, with students from their country of origin.

When I first took over the class at the beginning of October, I noticed that students had already entrenched themselves in specific friend groups. Some of these groups were determined, as is mentioned earlier, by their having been on exchange from the same country, but other groups were determined by friendships that I later discovered had been formed before the class had begun in September. Students were reluctant to engage with peers outside of their friendship circles. Students sat at the same group of desks with the same individuals every class. Students had further grown accustomed to working on projects with the same set of friends throughout the semester. The teacher had allowed students to self-select, and the students had fallen into the distinct habit of remaining with the same group of friends. Aside from some minor class interactions, the classroom dynamic did not shift throughout the course of the unit.

Teacher as Researcher

I have been an active Teacher on Call within the Greater Victoria School District since October, 2014. The majority of my teaching work had occurred at Quadra Secondary, and I have been closely connected to the many programs within the school since my first teaching practicum. I worked closely with many of the students and teachers at Quadra Secondary over the past four years as both a pre-service teacher and as Teacher on Call. I have filled various roles within the school as a teacher. I have also been involved with the Quadra Slam Poetry team, and in 2015 I acted as chaperone and assistant coach during while the team competed at the Provincial Slam Poetry Championship in Vancouver- Hullabaloo. My involvement with the various programs at Quadra has sparked my interest in the ways in which students learn by engaging with activities that are not traditionally a part of their classroom experience.

Being a new teacher offered its own set of challenges to the study. As I taught the month-long unit I was not simply learning about the effects of video games on student learning.

I was also discovering my own pedagogical philosophy, learning about my strengths and weaknesses as an educator, and building confidence in my own practice. Occupying the dual role of teacher and researcher was at times quite difficult, and I often reflected on my own teaching practice as much as I did on the study itself. I feel that my place as an educator researcher in this study was quite unique as not only was I a young teacher who was able to connect with the students based on proximity of age, I was also deeply entrenched in video game culture itself. Thus, perhaps unlike some other educators, I was not approaching the introduction of video games into the classroom as an outsider, but was deeply enmeshed in the culture of video games when I began teaching the unit. Being steeped in the culture of video games affected the study in numerous ways. For one, while designing the unit I was able to use my own exposure to video games in order to collect various titles that I felt would be both useful for curricular purposes and suitable for the classroom. This does not mean that I scoured the shelves for video games that had both educational value, and had little offensive material, but rather that I had an understanding of the inherent value of games that I knew students were already playing -- I was playing those same games too. I understood why a student would dedicate weeks of their free time to playing through a game, and I felt that those experiences that students had playing video games outside of class would translate to valuable experiences playing the same games in a classroom setting. Further, I was connected to individuals who considered themselves video gamers. These connections allowed me to consult with them on various game titles, borrow gaming equipment, and even arrange class visits in which they would talk about their own experiences playing video games to the students in the class.

This position also shifted the way I interacted with the students. Although I was without a doubt their teacher over the month long unit in which this study took place, I was able to

connect with many of the students with ease that would not have been possible had I not been both a young teacher and a video gamer myself.

Emerging Identities of Teacher Researcher

As I was a beginning educator at the time the study took place I was constantly questioning and developing my own pedagogical process alongside my emerging understanding of self as researcher. This dual process of emergent self was extraordinarily complex, and should be recognized as undoubtedly affecting the study itself. My own insecurities surrounding my competency as both a teacher and a researcher were constantly being challenged, and as the month long unit progressed I became more keenly aware of how my own presence and biases were affecting the students' experiences within the classroom. My own pedagogical beliefs, relationships with students, and assumptions about student literacies impacted the study in significant ways. I have identified four main beliefs that I feel affected the study most significantly: 1. I held a belief that the majority of content and activities that students encountered in school situations was not personally relevant to them. This belief was based on both my own experiences in High School, and my experiences working as a pre-service teacher and a teacher on call. Often while working as a teacher on call I would be working in classroom situations where students felt little genuine connection to the content of their coursework. I often found myself caught between the necessity of completing the lesson laid out to me by the teacher whose class I was covering, and allowing space for students to explore their learning on their own terms.

1. I supposed that most participants in the study would see video games as a welcome addition to the classroom. This belief was based largely on my previous interactions with students. Many of our conversations centered on videogames, and video game

culture. It seemed to me to be an integral part of many students' lives. I also feel that this belief was influenced by the fact that I myself was a video gamer, and was entrenched in video game culture. I feel that I would at times project my own interest in video games onto students', assuming that they would have a similar interest and knowledge base. However, this belief did prove to be valid in most instances, as even students who reported as being non-gamers had significant experience playing video games and reported to enjoy playing video games -- especially in a classroom setting.

2. I felt that students would be able to make complex connections between various ideas and texts, if the ideas and texts presented to students were relevant and engaging. This belief was founded on readings of Freire, Gee, and the New London Group, along with my experiences teaching in the flexible studies program at Reynolds Secondary.
3. I assumed that most students would be able to understand the content of a video game with little assistance from myself as a teacher. I held this belief mainly due to my previous experiences using video games in classrooms, on both my first and second practicum experiences. It was clear from those experiences that many of students were adept at understanding various game narratives on their own. I discovered on my first practicum speaking too much about a game's story negatively affected student engagement with the game itself. However, when I got out of the way and let students play the game with little interference from myself I found that they were able to pull meaning from the game in ways in which I did not expect.

Finally, while not a belief or assumption, the fact that I did not have much experience working with English Language Learners and had few tools with which to adequately engage and interact with them affected the study in significant ways. Throughout the course of the unit

I became more aware of some of the difficulties that English language learners face within a classroom, and was provided with a few ideas about how to improve my teaching practice from the students themselves.

While I do not believe that my personal biases undercut the value of the findings of the study, I believe it is important to be aware of the way in which my own biases and emerging understanding of self weave through my findings, observations, and understanding of the data.

Data Collection

Data was collected through two main methods. The first was observational notes from the classes as they were being taught. These notes included self-reflection and observations about the day after the classes had occurred. Second, at the completion of the unit, a series of focus groups were held with students who were involved in the research project. The focus groups made use of open-ended questions designed to facilitate discussion surrounding the experiences students had while video games were used in their classroom.

Observation

Class observations played an important role in the collection of data for my study (see figure 1 on page 26). They provided a rich description of what occurred from day to day while I was teaching using video games as a primary text. Further, detailed class observations allowed me to begin to recognize emergent themes occurring throughout the study. Careful observation thus informed the creation of my focus group and the interview questions that were used therein.

Occupying the role of teacher-researcher within this study informed the method of observation that was used. Although I recognize that my own biases shaped what I did and did not observe and record, it was my intention to allow my observations to be dictated by what

naturally emerges as the study unfolded. Thus I employed a method of unstructured observation, allowing emergent themes to unfold more naturally as the events of each day occurred.

However, obtaining the class observations while teaching a class, and setting up numerous game consoles was difficult. I was never afforded the time to record notes while the class was in session and was required to record my notes after the class had finished, quickly jotting down significant events that stood out in my memory. I would then review these events and expand my descriptions of what I saw occurring during the class.

There is a certain kind of chaos involved in teaching any High School class, and the introduction of technology often exacerbates this feeling of chaos. Often projectors won't work properly, internet connections will mysteriously cut in and out at inopportune times, and audio connections will fail. The reality of teaching an English Class with video games in a space that is not meant to accommodate multiple video game consoles was difficult. I relied on the kindness of other staff members at the school, who let me use extra rooms and borrow technology. I also relied on students who would volunteer to set up the various gaming consoles in the surrounding classrooms. Each day would require my arriving at the school 30 minutes before the students arrived in order to begin to set-up the various equipment needed to play the games. At times I would have students arrive early as well and they would assist me in setting up the technology. I would test each system, load the appropriate game, and then class would begin.

During the classes I would pay attention to how students interacted with one another, how students engaged with the game, students' body language during class discussions, what students would say to one another, and how long students would focus on a particular activity. I

would ask students questions about the narrative of the game or the gameplay, I would ask them what they thought of the game and if they needed any assistance, and I would challenge them to consider what the game was trying to communicate to them and how the game related to other narratives that they had encountered. I would move between the three different spaces that I had set up, engaging with different groups of students at different times. This meant that often, especially while students were engaging with the video games, I was unable to observe the whole class at once -- while observing, and working with one group of students I was unaware of what was happening for another group of students who were occupying a different space. This was one of the limitations of the study, and is indeed a limitation of using video games in the classroom -- it is impossible for one individual to be in different spaces at the same time. Further, it is desirable to not have more than two video games systems operating within the same room, at the same time. I found that too many gaming systems operating at one time in the same space makes it difficult for students to focus on the game they are playing, and they become over-stimulated to the point where they cannot pay attention to their own game's narrative.

A Second Set of Eyes

At certain times throughout the unit I would benefit from having my supervisor visit the class and observe. She served as a critical friend to the study offering insights that often caused me to rethink my ideas and plans. After, the class and sometimes during we would discuss what we had seen occurring. This was helpful as it would inform my observational notes for that day, and help me to see things that I would have missed. Some of the observations that my supervisor, Dr. Sanford, made during these visits helped inform what I would pay attention to as the study progressed. For example, Dr. Sanford, was able to notice and make informed

comments on the interactions of the international students during the unit -- bringing to light a number of things that I had previously been unaware of, such as their understanding of the story, and the way they interacted while together. Our discussions around the dynamics of the class were particularly helpful in helping me unpack what was happening for the students during the study.

Interviews

Sparkes notes that within qualitative research an “interview is a conversation with a purpose” (2014). I shaped the questions for focus group interviews based on the observations that I made throughout the study. I used open-ended interview questions following teaching the unit and making close observations that centered around four major categories (based on observational data): student engagement, classroom community, academic understanding, and motivation. The categories that were used to form the questions were derived from studying my observation notes. These four categories allowed me to further respond to both my research question and what I had observed going on in the class during the unit of study. The interview questions served as a springboard for conversations in which both the participants and I began to unpack and understand the experiences of the students. I interviewed the students in small focus groups at a time that was convenient to them based on their voluntary involvement. Consent to be involved was obtained by a third person unrelated to the class who made it clear to the students that their involvement in the study was voluntary and would not impact their grades in the class. Ethical permission to do the study was gained by the school district and the University of Victoria ethics board.

Focus Groups

In order to privilege student voice throughout this study, I made use of focus groups. Focus groups allowed the students and myself to reflect on the experience of inhabiting a classroom where video games were used as the primary texts. The use of focus groups relied on a series of questions centered around four major themes of the study. However, the questions were used as a guide or a reference point and the conversation was allowed to emerge naturally. I made use of focus groups in order to better understand the experiences of students upon completion of the study. At the end of the unit I interviewed students in small groups. These groups were determined based on who the students worked with on their final project, which the students had self-selected. Unsurprisingly, the students self-selected their groups based on their pre-established friendship groups. Thus, the make-up of each focus group mirrored the make-up of the class when I first took over. There were no groups in the study in which the genders were mixed, so the groups were either entirely male, or entirely female. Further, the members of each group tended to have similar cultural upbringings -- that is to say that the international students made up some groups, while students who had lived in Canada more permanently made up other groups. There were few exceptions of international students grouping with students who had spent significant time in Canada. All focus group sessions were digitally audio-recorded. Students participating in the focus groups were made aware that they were free to withdraw from the focus groups, or the study at any time.

Participants

The following descriptions of the participants were made after the completion of the study. The descriptions are based on my interactions with the students, my observations, my

notes, the interviews, and the transcripts of the focus group interviews themselves. I include this description to give a fuller sense of the students who participated in this study.

Focus Group 1: Susan, Sami, Kelly, Liz

The first focus group consisted of four girls who were the most active participants in class activities throughout the unit. Each of the four students would contribute to class discussion, and would energetically partake in all class activities. Two of the four students reported enjoying video games outside of the classroom, though both students played video games with their brothers, and not on their own. The other two students reported not playing video games outside of some small games on their phone. However, they did not consider this ‘serious gaming’ and were hesitant to label their phone activity as video gaming. One of the students in the group was born in Vietnam, and reported English as her second language. However, unlike some other students in the class who spoke English as a second language she only felt English as a barrier when writing. She was comfortable speaking in many different situations, and was, in fact the most vocal member of the group during class discussions. Each student in this group attended regularly, and while they may not have found interest in every subject they took they reported feeling comfortable and having success in most of their classes.

Focus Group 2: Maggie and Jessie

Maggie and Jessie would often sit with two other girls in the class, Kelsey and Rhonda, but chose to form their own group when it came time create their final project. They also asked to be interviewed as their own group. Pia was an exchange student from Germany who was studying in Victoria BC for one year. Jessie was comfortable, and proficient writing and speaking in the English Language. She often reported that school in Canada was ‘easier’ than school in Germany, and was often keen to engage in academic activities. Maggie was not

outwardly expressive, but was keen to try everything, and was avidly engaged with all class activities. Both Jessie, and Maggie self-identified as ‘gamers’ and had played many of the titles used during the study.

Focus Group 3: Abbad, Sam, Rick, Mike

The third focus group consisted of two students for whom English was a second language and two students who had been born and raised in Victoria BC. The group had formed years before, and were united around a common fondness for hip hop and sports. Abbad and Sam were the groups’ most vocal participants, in spite of the fact that English was their second language. They were extremely confident, and never hesitated to offer their opinion during class discussions. Rick and Mike were much more reserved in their interactions with the rest of the class, and would often spend their time on their phones listening to music. No one in the group reported being particularly interested in video games. While they would sometimes engage with video games outside of class, they reported that the only game they would play was the soccer title *FIFA* (EA Sports). The whole group had a tendency to quickly lose focus when given a task, and reported finding school generally uninteresting.

Focus Group 4: Marvin and Mateo

Marvin and Mateo were on exchange from Mexico City. Both students rarely came to class. Neither student reported finding school either interesting or relevant. At times Mateo would show up to class smelling of marijuana. Both students played video games outside of class, but reported doing so less than an hour per week. Each student was a capable English speaker, but had difficulty with some of the written aspects of the class.

Focus Group 5: Kelsey and Rhonda

Kelsey and Rhonda preferred to keep to themselves. Rhonda would often leave class for extended periods of time, and would often not attend her other classes. Kelsey preferred to be on her phone whenever possible. It would often appear as if neither student was engaged by any activity that occurred within the class. However, conversations with both of them revealed that they often valued what was happening in the class, and were at times highly engaged with what was going on. Both students reported feeling an overall dissatisfaction with school, and Rachel reported feeling high levels of anxiety in many in school situations.

Focus Group 6: Li, Zhao, Biyu

Li, Zhao and Biyu were Chinese international students who were studying in Victoria for a year. The group kept decidedly to themselves limiting their interactions with other classmates. This particular group of students found the English Language to be a significant barrier to their ability to participate in class activities. Zhao and Biyu both had erratic attendance patterns. Li had more consistent attendance patterns, but was reluctant to engage in class activities. Li, Zhao, and Biyu all reported that they enjoyed playing video games specifically competitive online games such as *League of Legends*.

Focus Group Snow 7: Kris, Tony, James

Kris, Tony and James grew up in the greater Victoria area. The three had been friends for a number of years, and continually sat and worked with one another during class. They were not as vocal during class discussions as some other class members, and they were often distracted by their phones. All three students self-identified as gamers, with James professing to be an avid gamer. All three students played some of the games that were used as part of the study.

The Unit

I designed a teaching unit for a secondary school English class that was intended to take approximately one month to complete. This unit was designed in order to facilitate student understanding of critically examining different media forms. The idea was to build on the students' knowledge of critical assessment that they had been applying to traditional written texts, and apply the same techniques to video game narratives.

The unit that I designed as part of this study was built for a grade 10 English language Arts class. However, the unit could easily work in any Secondary School English class with only slight modifications. The unit was designed to take approximately one month of class time, and was intended to facilitate student capacity for critically examining media. After the completion of the study the New BC Curriculum was released. Students now have the option of taking an English course entitled New Media that they can take this course in either their grade 10 or 11 years. Presently, there is a more transparent connection between the design of this unit and the prescribed curriculum for English 10 and 11 in British Columbia than there existed when this unit was first conceived. However, the unit was still extremely viable and deeply connected to the prescribed curriculum when it was created.

The unit was divided into three distinct sections. In the first section of the unit, which took approximately one week, students were given opportunities to explore their existing relationship with media. As a class we explored the various ways in which youth respond to media, and examined the methods various media uses in order to deliver its messages. Students spent time watching TV advertisements, looking at print media, and watching small scenes from films in order to decode the ways in which media delivers various messages. This process took approximately one week and involved class discussions as well as short written reflections.

During this time we focused on the ways in which a multitude of information can be conveyed in mere seconds with any audio-visual text. Often times we would watch a small clip from a film -- under 30 seconds -- and students would then provide as much information as they could about the narrative. We would discuss the use of camera angles, sound, music, and body language in the films, and show how those factors contributed to the students' understanding of narrative. For this section it was important to select works with which the students were not overly familiar. This ensured that students' past knowledge of the work was not aiding their understanding, but that they had to focus more on the elements in the film clip in order to piece together the narrative information. While most students proved an ability to understand quite a lot about a particular film, or show from a short clip they had more difficulty explaining how they had come to those understandings. It was here that I was able to speak to the techniques used in multi media in order to convey messages, and elicit emotions. Once students became more familiar with these techniques, they were able to identify them more readily. After we had examined film clips, we began looking at various TV and print advertisements, dissecting the ways in which adverts used similar techniques as film in order to manipulate emotion and provide information. The purpose of the first section of the unit was to help students identify and critically examine the elements that different forms of media employed in communicating various messages. These skills with the identification of what is being represented, the way in which it is being represented, and the deconstruction of what has been represented were explored in the hopes that the students would be able to apply these techniques when looking at other forms of media in their lives, and, later in the unit, i.e., the video games we would be playing.

In the second phase of the unit students were divided into small groups and given time to play different video games. Students would play these videogames for approximately 30 minutes and then we would spend 30 minutes discussing their experiences. Students were encouraged to use the skills developed in the first part of the unit and apply them to the interpretation of videogames. Students explored the ways in which videogames manipulated their emotions and told a story. Students considered the use of sound, colour, and level design as methods that were adopted by videogames in order to communicate various messages. During this time the students played five different games, playing a different game each day of the week. This was an especially hectic time for me as the teacher and researcher as students were learning how to play video games as a group, and how to interpret game narratives in a sometimes loud and chaotic classroom environment. Further, I was dealing with the logistics of using five gaming systems across three different rooms. The amount of time required for set up and take down was significant, and managing the class became difficult with students spread throughout three different spaces. However, once the class had established a rhythm classes ran much more smoothly. It was during this phase of the unit that we began to discuss some of the problematic aspects of gaming -- misogyny, violence, addiction -- as well as the aspects of gaming that were enjoyable. During this phase of the unit we explored the ways in which games dealt with, commented on, and co-opted societal issues. Towards the end of the week our class discussions became longer, and the time spent playing games became shorter. One of the main issues of discussion that arose during this phase of the unit was the issue of gender representation in video games. This topic would continue to be a focal point throughout the unit and even became the topic of a full class debate in other classes within the school.

In the next stage of the unit students were again divided into six groups. Students were allowed to self-select their groups in keeping with the established rhythms of the class. Each group selected a game to play through in its entirety. Some groups were able to play through two games due to the short duration of some of the games. Each day of the third stage of the unit involved the students playing their chosen game, and then discussing what they were experiencing. Some of these discussions would take place near the end of class, after the group had played the games, but others would occur as the groups were playing the games. I would sometimes sit in on the conversations, and gameplay sessions with students, and at others I would stay back and allow the students to explore the game without my interference.

Selecting the games that were used for this part of the unit was an involved process. I based my selections on a variety of criteria, opting for games that had strong narrative arcs, and could be played over several hours. Many modern video games with intriguing narratives can take tens of hours to complete, with some of the most significant games requiring time investments of up to one hundred hours. Playing through one of these games in a classroom environment is simply not feasible. I was therefore required to find games that students could play within a reasonable amount of time. I wanted the students to have the opportunity to play through the games within the allotted class time. Further, I was hoping to find games that had intriguing narratives, and that would be relevant to the students. In order to accomplish this I spoke with numerous student gamers, participants from other research studies involving video games, friends, and used my own knowledge of video games. Though these games were used for the third part of the teaching unit, I did incorporate more commercially recognizable games during the second phase of the study. When we initially began playing games, we played some games with which students were more familiar such as Grand Theft Auto 5, and Call of Duty

Modern Warfare. It was important, I felt, to include video games that made up part of the gaming cultural zeitgeist. I did not want the games I chose to be games that could be considered “educational”. It was important to try to have as authentic as possible a representation of the video games present in the classroom. Further, I was open to the participants of the study suggesting their own titles that they wanted to play as part of this unit. However, no students elected to bring in a game of their choice for this unit. The process for choosing games for this unit took many months. As I was a gamer myself I had played some video games that I felt would be useful for use in the classroom- some of those games were used in this study. However, the most useful thing I did when selecting games for this study was to speak with students who were gamers, and friends of mine who played video games. Each of those conversations yielded a multiplicity of titles that I had had no previous experience with. From my experiences with video games, and my conversations with students and friends I was able to curate five video game titles that I used for this study. The games that were used for this portion of the unit were:

Gone Home: Gone Home is a story exploration video game. In the game the player takes control of Katie, a college student who has returned home after travelling Europe. Upon arrival the player discovers that their home is empty, and must use the evidence left behind by their family in order to discover what has occurred. By reading letters, finding journals, and sorting through the possessions of their family members the player pieces together the story of what has occurred since the player has been gone.

Life is Strange: Life is strange is a narrative video game in which you take control of a teenager who is able to reverse time after suffering an injury during a storm. The game

takes place in and around a high school, and explores themes of friendship, betrayal, drug-use, and sexual assault.

The Stanley Parable: The Stanley Parable is an experimental interactive narrative game, in which the player takes control of Stanley, an office worker at an unnamed company. The game begins with Stanley awakening to discover that all of his co-workers have disappeared. The player then moves through the office in order to discover what has occurred. Unique to the title is the fact that the game contains a narrator who narrates everyone of Stanley's actions. The narrator will often say things before they have occurred and the player then has the choice as to whether or not to follow the narrators instructions.

Portal: Portal is a first person puzzle physics game where the player takes control of a character named Chell. Chell awakes to find herself part of a series of tests, involving a increasingly difficult physics puzzles.

The Walking Dead Season One: The walking Dead Season One is a narrative video game in which the player controls a man wrongly convicted of murder on the first day of a zombie outbreak. The game is loosely based on the Walking Dead comic series, and requires the player to navigate numerous personal relationships, while making decisions to ensure their survival throughout a five-episode campaign.

Once students had played through their game, or games, they created a reflective project that centred on their understanding of one of the themes that emerged while playing the game. Projects could take multiple forms and included podcasts, slide shows, journals, and art projects. These projects were created in small groups, usually consisting of all or part of the members of the group with whom the students had played the game. The projects that were

completed at the end of the unit touched on major issues that we had explored in class such as the representation of teenagers in media, violence in media, feminist discourse, and character and narrative development. Students produced a variety of projects that included half hour long podcasts, artworks, creative writings and visual essays.

One month after the completion of the unit I interviewed the students in their focus groups. The focus group discussions were audio recorded and then later transcribed. Later I used descriptive analysis to interpret the focus group transcripts and the class observation notes. This process involved first transcribing the interviews from the digital audio files. In order to do this I listened to the files and transcribed what I heard into a secure word document. I recorded each word, even non-consequential words such as “like” and “um”, and responses such as laughter. Once that was completed I read through each transcript and made general notes about the participants’ responses. After that I returned to my research question and combed through the transcripts again. Based on the transcripts and my research question I identified six categories that I observed were recurring throughout the data. I created a table with the six categories and read through the transcripts again pulling pertinent quotes and inserting them into the appropriate category in the table. These categories were later reduced to four themes as I came to understand that some of the categories were repetitive. From this analysis I categorized my data into observable themes, and constructed my findings.

Chapter 4: Findings

Based on my observations I recognized that video games offer youth experiences that run counter to experiences they encounter in traditional learning spaces. Youth engage with video games in a variety of ways, for a variety of reasons. By introducing video games as an acceptable text within a traditional learning space, the participants of the study reported that a number of significant classroom dynamics shifted. My conversations with students, in conjunction with my observations, revealed that four major categories emerged from the data, including: development of community, student engagement, relevance, and student success. After analyzing the data I recognized four descriptive themes emerging from each category: Relevance: Video games creating spaces for “real life” complex issues to be addressed; Student engagement with own learning from issues in interactive narrative; Community organically working to learn together to solve problems; and student success in multiple ways. that In the following section I will explore each of these areas, and the ways in which the participants shifted in their relation to the traditional classroom space as a result of the inclusion of video games within that space.

Relevance: Video games creating spaces for “real life” complex issues to be addressed

The crux of this study was based on my belief that too often what students are asked to study within school is not relevant to their own lives. This belief was founded on my conversations with and observations of students during my time as a pre service teacher and a teacher on call. Students often feel alienated from what they are asked to learn, and they are often unable to see how it connects to who they are, and who they want to become. The students that I had built relationships with as Teacher on Call in various classrooms would often tell me how disconnected they felt from what they were studying in class. Students reported feeling

alienated from the activities of the classroom, and thus became disengaged and apathetic towards their own learning. These themes of disengagement and lack of connection to classroom activities emerged with the students in my study as well. When asked whether they felt that what they studied in school was relevant to their own lives the answer was a unanimous and emphatic “no”. Sam points out that, “in a lot of classes it’s just like, hand out these assignments and the teacher explains it for like 10 minutes and then it’s just like assignments on assignments on tests on exams, and it just doesn’t like, it doesn’t help socially, it doesn’t help anybody.” The consistency of responses to the question of relevance is alarming to me, though not at all surprising.

As the video game unit progressed we began to look critically at media, and video games in particular. Video games often deal with mature themes, such as violence, drug use, and sexuality, but they often do not deal with these themes in a mature manner. However, introducing video games into the classroom inspired discussions that centred around these issues. The class became a place where we could discuss some of these more complex issues, and dissect the way video games and other forms of media presented them. What became of particular interest to the class was the representation of women in video games. Over the course of a week, we examined and critiqued the representation of women in many video game titles. The class explored the tropes of the princess in need of saving in games like Mario and Donkey Kong, to the overtly sexualized representation of women in many role-playing games. The class became divided along distinctly gendered lines during the initial part of this exploration. Many of the males in the class felt that there was not a problem with the way in which games represented women, while the females in the class were quick to recognize many of the problematic aspects of gender representation within video games, and other forms of media.

While these discussions did not serve to unite the whole class, they did allow for a variety of voices to be heard, and allowed for the students to more critically explore the kinds of media they were interacting with. The males in the class -- even the ones who were the most adamant in their defense of the idea that most games were not misogynistic -- did begin to see how many games represented women as overly sexualized stereotypes, and also identified that male representations were often unrealistic and unhealthy as well. In the focus groups, I asked the students about their experiences during this week, specifically about whether they felt it was important to discuss these issues within the class, and received some interesting answers.

Jessie pointed out that often students are left to navigate these issues on their own, and are not afforded a place within the classroom to talk about them:

I think it's really important to say something about the issues because these are issues that are part of our world, that we kind of have to fight, and it's better than saying nothing, then people don't know about it and then it will stay a problem. So I think it's really important to talk about.

Some of the students had not before considered whether or not video games were problematic in their representation of gender. The class discussions seemed to shift how they viewed and interacted with media. In one focus group Susan and Sami reported how they now critique video games, using cover art and outside sources, to discover if the games are problematic in their representations of women. Susan reported that, "Now I keep looking up whether they're sexist or not, because of the debates. So, I'm like 'oh, bad one'" (laughs). Susan here indicates that the way that she interacts with video games has shifted due to her participation in the class activities and the study. The debates that were held in class, which were often extensive, resulted in her shifting the way she views the games that she plays.

Though her response was brief, her words do indicate a shift in perspective from the way she would previously interact with the media. Sami, who was in the same focus group as Susan, also reported a shift in the way she interacted with the medium of video games. Her response directly followed Susan's, echoing her sentiment about the sexist nature of video games. Sami reported that, "Now, like all the video game covers and stuff, I'm like, 'Oh, that's really bad. They, have like a girl on the front or something like that.'" Though again this response may seem brief it is important to note that before Sami had not considered that game covers were representative of sexist content. This shift in focus was due to the conversations we had in class. When I asked the group directly whether or not the classroom was an appropriate place to discuss issues of violence, sexism, sexual identity, and drug use, the group responded that it was appropriate and necessary. Kelly said:

"Yeah, because if you don't learn it from a classroom you might not get the opportunity to learn it, and you'll just be like, 'Oh, that's like how women should be, but it's like not.' Cause, it's just like how you like grew up with it and you're not like educated on that subject."

Kelly's comment illustrated to me that too often we ignore issues of sexism and misogyny within the classroom. Interestingly, the introduction of video games within the classroom opened up an opportunity to have discussions surrounding these ideas in a way that was relevant and engaging for the students.

The issue of sexism and misogyny continually struck a chord with the members of this group. In this instance Kelly again picked up on the importance of talking and learning about these issues. At the time of this study it seemed that these students did not have a lot of spaces where conversations around gender and sexism were taking place. When I asked the group if

they discussed these issues in other classes they responded by saying in unison, “no”.

Intriguingly, the use of video games in the classroom allowed a dialogue around these issues to emerge.

Video games have had and continue to have a tenuous relationship with gender roles. The industry is dominated by men, a recent survey conducted of the International Game Developers Association found that 74 percent of workers are men (Beck, 2018, p. 1). While the number of gamers who identify as female is increasing, it is still in large part a male dominated industry. While some of the games that we played within our unit were written and developed by individuals who identified as female, it was the use of mainstream games with many overtly misogynist aspects that led to our discussions on gender.

Liz later expanded on Kelly’s idea of why discussing these issues in class is important saying, “You wouldn’t be able to react to it when it comes to you. You just wouldn’t know about it in the real life.” Liz points out that it is necessary to have these discussions, and to question the messages that media is presenting, because ‘real life’ requires that you respond to these issues. These are issues that were of great importance to these students and they saw the discussions as extremely relevant for their understanding of how to be in the world, yet they found few class spaces that enabled them to discuss these issues.

Students in the study expressed a desire to explore issues and ideas that were relevant to them. Students were interested in exploring life lessons, themes, and morals through texts in which they saw themselves reflected. Some games that we played in class -- specifically *Gone Home*, and *Life is Strange*-- did reflect the experiences that some of the students were having, specifically the experiences of being a teenager trying to discover their own identity. When

speaking about their experiences playing *Life is Strange* and *Gone Home*, Maggie and Jessie pointed out that the video games they played felt relevant to their own lives. Maggie said:

“I definitely think a lot of the things in video games, or even reading, is pretty relevant, because a lot of them have like life lessons in them. Especially the video games we played, like you had to figure out things and they were all pretty realistic stories.”

Here the ‘realistic stories’ indicate that the characters in the games behaved in realistic ways. They were representative of the experiences of being a teenager in high school. Further, the issues that they had to face in the game were similar to the issues that Maggie and Jessie felt they had to face, or may have to deal with, in their own lives. These issues included identity, friendships, drug use, strained relationships with family, school, and sexuality. Maggie further expanded on the idea of relevance, saying that the video game unit was “a bit more relevant than a lot of the things we’re doing normally. Because, a lot of the stuff we study is about the past, but that’s still good, but like video games can teach you a lot of things.” While she does not here expand upon what exactly those “things’ video games can teach you are, she is indicating that the things that she can learn from playing games in a group are important to her, and that those things are not available to her in other classroom environments. The idea of relevance that video games had begun to bring into the participants’ school experience is directly tied to, and created some of the conditions for the next emergent theme that was student engagement.

Student engagement with own learning from issues in interactive narratives

To maintain high achievement, British Columbia must transform its education system to one that better engages students in their own learning and fosters the skills and competencies students will need to succeed. (BC Ministry of Education, n.d., p. 2)

One of the many struggles that educators face within their classrooms is the issue of student engagement. Most educators understand that student engagement is necessary for student success. Yet finding ways to encourage and develop student engagement within the classroom can prove elusive for many teachers. One of the key issues surrounding student engagement has to do with relevance. While educators may often understand the relevance of what they are teaching within their classrooms, or perceive that what they are teaching is relevant, the ability to for teachers to clearly communicate that relevance to their students often falls short. Students are often told that issues are relevant, without being asked what is significant to them. Finding ways to incorporate issues, texts, and ideas with which students are actively engaged can increase the students' sense that their classroom activities are immediately relevant to their own lives. During the unit it became apparent that some of the issues that were being raised by our interactions with video games were immediately relevant to their own lives. This explains in part some of the increased levels of engagement that I observed and that students reported during this study. However, relevance only accounted for a partial explanation of their engagement. Through our focus group discussions and my own classroom observations I became aware of how introducing video games into the classroom increased students' level of engagement with their own learning.

While trying to conceive of ways in which to increase student engagement in the classroom can sometimes be difficult, Abbad offered this simple solution: "I feel like when you implement something that students like, that's when they really work hard at it." The idea may be exceptionally simple, but it seems to get to the core of the issue of engagement. If the teacher implements ideas, issues, or topics that students like, then the students will be engaged in their work. Students want work that is meaningful to them. Sam expanded on this idea, shedding

light on some of his experiences in other classrooms, and why those experiences have not been engaging. He noted,

“I think video games helped us with group work. A lot of people need to learn how to work in groups, and in a lot of classes it’s just like, hand out these assignments and the teacher explains it for like 10 minutes and then it’s just like assignments on assignments on tests on exams, and it just doesn’t like, it doesn’t help socially, it doesn’t help anybody.”

Sam here also points out that for him school assignments that are based on an isolationist model are not as valuable to his own sense of learning. Conversely, he points out that the socially constructed nature of the video game unit was beneficial, engaging, and relevant.

This connects to the personal and social core competency that is outlined by the new British Columbia curriculum

One of the key issues with engagement has to do with the texts themselves. Often times students will be hesitant to read the assigned texts, or a handful of students will be engaged with the chosen text, while the majority of the class will have little investment in what is being explored. I have seen this occur in numerous classrooms in which I had served as Teacher on Call. This problem has been mitigated in some English classes by allowing students to choose their own novels, however when I spoke to the students in my study I began to see how using video games allows students to engage with texts in a different way that they reported as finding more enjoyable. Further, many of the students reported that this higher level of engagement allowed them to more fully understand the texts, and to ultimately create more meaningful and fully developed final projects.

Rick explained that for him playing a video game worked better than reading a novel, saying, “Uh, well like for me it’s better ‘cause in a book I get lost, or not interested, but playing a video game I stay interested and I can actually get to know the story.” Rick points out that playing the game allowed him to get into the story. This was one of the first times in an English class that Rick was able to become familiar with the narrative of the text that was being studied. Abbad, who was also in Rick’s group, explained how the use of video games aided his memory, as they were visual texts: “You just don’t remember as many things with a book. Cause, I’m a visual learner so if I see it then I will be able to remember it, but like if I read it I won’t be able to remember as much. Like I can picture it in my head, what happened, what I saw.” Here Abbad points out that the combination of the visual stimuli, with his capacity to manipulate the narrative increased his ability to remember key elements of the text. This narrative structure is preferred for Abbad as it better matches the type of learner he is. Video games are the only medium that can address this need for Abbad as they are the only medium which allows for agency from the player. Other narrative mediums, such as film or novels, invite passive participation in narrative construction, where as video games allow the player to influence the outcome of the story.

Students from other groups also reported that the use of video games as a narrative text engaged them more than traditional texts that are often used in English Language Arts classrooms. Similarly to Abbad, Sami points out that; “It was easier to understand the story, as you were going through it than like reading a book or something. It was just a more effective, intriguing.” Aside from the fact that the video game made understanding the narrative ‘easier’, the fact that the games were interactive and allowed players choice in how the narrative unfolded proved to be quite engaging for many of the students. Liz points out that, “in these

games you get to choose your path, instead of books (where) it's all written out." Even though games' narratives are scripted they rely on player input in order to move the narrative forward, and, unlike novels or films which usually have one predetermined narrative, video games often offer a multitude of narratives in which the player can interact.

Maggie and Jessie, who were in a different focus group, had a similar experience to that of the other students. Jessie notes that, "it's like you're in the story -- kind of, like you're in the story, like you kind of...you're a part of the story." Maggie continues where Jessie left off saying, "Yeah, rather than just reading it and trying to imagine it in your head, you actually get to be a part of it." In this dialogue it becomes clear that the feeling of being part of the story heightens their sense of engagement with the text. This experience of being 'part of the story' is unique to the medium of video games, and seemed to work well within the context of this class, as it pulled the students into the narratives of the games.

Liz's group further expands upon the idea that the games themselves engaged the students. The games that were chosen for this unit seemed to resonate with a number of the students in the study. Liz pointed out that, "The games were fun to play." When I asked her what she meant by that, she expanded her idea, saying "They were just really interesting games, that you get really connected to." The group further expanded on the idea of the games being 'fun' when Lucy added, "You get to like, connect with the characters." At this point Sami interjected by saying, "It was like you get to, like, unlock, like, different parts of like the room and stuff." To this Kelly added, "And you get to like control the story, so you have power over what she says and stuff, like for the options you pick...yeah." This exchange again shows how the act of choice within experiencing the narrative through the video game was engaging for the students, and gave them a sense of autonomy over their own learning.

Zhao's group, which consisted entirely of exchange students from China, further echoed the idea that the games were engaging. Zhao pointed out that, "play the discovery game, and to discover all the details, and to find out what the story is about, I really like this game. It's kind of game cause, and sometimes I was in home and do some live show of this kind of game." Here Zhao was talking about the game *Gone Home*, and his comment surprised me. I did not expect that Zhao and the members of his group would have gotten enjoyment out of the game, nor that it would be the kind of game that he would watch a live show of in his home. Live shows are a type of video in which one person streams himself or herself playing a specific game online. Viewers watch the "live show" on video servers -- such as YouTube -- while the host of the video comments on what they are doing. Live shows are a way for gamers to learn more about a particular game, by watching other gamers play through the game with commentary. It was surprising because the game is heavily reliant on North American cultural references. However, what is evident is that the structure of the game hooked his interest, and the mechanics of "discovering all of the details" was enjoyable. This aspect of gameplay in which Zhao and his group sought out all of the details shows a level of narrative investigation that is not often seen with more traditional texts in classrooms, especially for these English as second language students. Further, the development of this skill, i.e., a close examination of a text, can also be useful if it can be applied to other activities outside of gaming. If a teacher can recognize and encourage this kind of deep examination within video games and then apply it to other activities and texts the students will benefit by developing a critical literacy that can be applied to many aspects of their lives.

In talking with the groups after we had finished the video game unit it became clear that many students found the use of video games in the classroom to be an engaging way to explore

a narrative. My class observations had led me to believe that the students were engaged with the unit, especially when they were afforded the opportunity to play the games in groups. The increase in attendance, coupled with the fact that students were focused on the games that they were playing throughout the unit, were signs that the inclusion of video games in the classroom did increase student engagement in the class. However, it was my conversations with the students during the focus groups that allowed me to realize that the use of video games was engaging for all the students who participated in the study. Kelsey and Rhonda, who at times seemed very disengaged and rarely contributed to class discussions, summed up their experiences concisely:

Kelsey: I think I liked it all.

Rhonda: Yeah, that was probably the best thing we've done in school.

Kelsey: Yeah.

If I had been a more experienced researcher I may have asked them to expand on their response their response about the unit being 'the best thing we've done in school. However, I am left with the short response without a detailed explanation as to what made the unit enjoyable.

Community: Organically working to learn together to solve problems

Video games are often said to be isolationist activities and there are many stereotypes that suggest that gamers are lonely individuals who spend inordinate amounts of time locked away from the rest of the world in isolation playing video games. While the stereotype of the isolated gamer may persist in some circles, it is clear that gamers that they are not as socially isolationist as the stereotype would suggest (Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, Gee, 2005, p. 106). As

stated earlier Shaffer et al. (2005) point out that many video game players are “thoroughly social phenomenon” (p. 106)

A classroom is a community of learners. However, one thing that students often feel in many classroom environments is a sense of isolation. Students may be in the same room as a number of their peers but it is rare that they feel a distinct sense of connection with them. It is clear that a classroom in which the learners feel a sense of connection with one another is a special place.

Creating a sense of classroom community is a difficult task for any teacher. Building relationships where the students trust the teacher is often difficult, but creating a space where the students trust one another, and are willing to work together, is often exceedingly difficult. Encouraging students to be vulnerable with one another, to work together, and to speak to peers who exist outside of their friend group, is often a lot to ask of any teenager.

During the study it became apparent that the use of video games increased the sense of classroom community. Using video games necessitated that students talk with one another, and work together simply in order to progress through the game. Liz explains how at one point she and her group members ended up in conversation with people that she would normally not connect with:

“When we were here playing Call of, uh... *The Walking Dead*, there were people here that we didn't know, but we were like talking to them asking them like, ‘Hey, how do you do this?’ and they were telling us, and they were like giving us tips and stuff, and we were just talking with them.”

Sami expands on this idea saying, “And we'd like never otherwise really talk to them.” This moment where Liz and Samu began conversing with a group of students they would not

normally talk to; this happened organically, and without prompting by me as the teacher. The group of students happened to be near Liz's group while they were trying to navigate the game *The Walking Dead*. The game provided and necessitated a reason to interact with a peer group that Liz and Sami had previously seen no reason to previously associate with. Further, the game provided an opportunity for the students to talk with each other, without the added pressure of conceiving of a topic to talk about -- the game provided a safety net for their social interaction. In another focus group interview Tony expanded on this idea saying, "People do ice breakers, like name games at the beginning of the year, but they could use video games instead." Tony recognized that video games afforded the class an opportunity to engage with one another and get to know one another in a social setting. Liz and Kelly echoed the idea that playing a game together can lead to an increased sense of community in terms of getting to know other students in the class. Liz pointed out that playing through a video game in class with students that they did not know would result in them "get to know them pretty fast." In order to explain how this would happen, and did happen during the unit Kelly said, "because you really like work together, and you get, like, into the game and then everyone wants to like make a decision and you kind of, like, work it out together. So you get to know each other."

Apart from social interactions with other students, the use of video games in the classroom encouraged cooperation between the students, creating a supportive learning community. One of the biggest aspects of video games is the solving of puzzles and the piecing together of narrative. Introducing video games into the classroom created a dynamic environment with students working with one another in order to successfully progress through the game and understand the narrative of the game. Working together became an integral part of the classroom experience. Sam speaks to this experience of working together:

“You guys can all use your ideas, put them all together, and then find what solves the game. So instead of one person with their one idea that doesn’t work, you have a whole bunch of people collecting ideas at once, and then putting them into the game, and then finding out what happens.”

Sam points out that working together is integral to experiencing the video games that were played in class. This idea came up multiple times from many different participants in the study. Maggie echoes the idea that it is necessary to work together: “Because, you like have to work together to figure it out, you can’t just be two separate people.” Emily’s idea runs counter many of the experiences that students report having in their classes, where they feel a sense of competition with one another, and often spend time comparing their abilities in class to those of their classmates. In this unit, however, success was hinged to their ability to work collaboratively with one another.

James, a student who was often isolated except for his two friends, had difficulty working in groups and preferred to work alone. When I asked him about working with other using video games in the classroom he had this to say: “In a school environment it forces me to work with people. It was really interesting, because sometimes people would have trouble getting through levels but I already knew how to get through them.” James used his knowledge of the game in order to help out his fellow peers while playing *Portal*. Kris, who was in James’ group during the unit, expands further and explains the benefits of working together during the unit:

‘There was a lot of puzzles and stuff in that game, and we could all figure it out, ‘cause we had one person doing it we could get help from the other guys too. So we would like

switch between people and if one of us got stuck the other one would just kind of help out -- pretty much.”

The idea of students working together came up numerous times in my focus group discussions with the students and provided an understanding of how the incorporation of video games into the classroom necessitated co-operation and ultimately the creation of classroom community. Maggie and Jessie, who played games on their own when not in school, echoed this sentiment when I asked them what it was like to play video games as a group:

Jessie: You could help each other and...

Maggie: Yeah, we had different ideas so we could put our ideas together to figure it out.

Jessie: It's more interesting to experience something with someone else, like you can share opinions and...

Maggie: Yeah.

Jessie: For example, in *Gone Home* how you, for example, open doors and finding some things, sometimes someone doesn't see an object and someone else does see it, and yeah.

Maggie: Because, you like have to work together to figure it out, you can't just be two separate people.

This exchange demonstrates how, for the students, working together became both enjoyable and necessary. They indicated that having multiple perspectives about the game allowed them to see things they otherwise might have missed. A more experienced teacher may have picked up on this during the unit and probed the students to consider how working together may allow them to see things someone else may have missed in areas other aspects of their lives beyond video games -- for example the exploration of social issues. However, the continual act

of working with one another in order to fully experience a text -- in this case the video game -- allowed for a shift in the classroom dynamic. As the unit progressed, students in the class became more comfortable speaking with one another and our discussions became livelier, with more peers willing to share their ideas in class. The use of video games in the classroom created a unique space where students were encouraged to work together, spoke and interacted with peers who existed outside of their group, and became more comfortable discussing issues in class. While the dynamics of the classroom did not shift entirely by the end of the unit, students did report an increased sense of classroom community by the end of the unit.

Student Success in multiple ways

One of the aspects that I was curious about at the beginning of my study was the way in which the use of video games in the classroom could contribute to student success. One of the main issues with this is that student success is difficult to measure. The term student success is inherently vague and overwhelmingly subjective. Thus, from an outside perspective, it can be difficult to gauge student success in the classroom at any given time. For the purposes of this study I have determined student success to mean a variety of things; for some participants success meant learning some new English vocabulary, for others it meant working successfully in a group, and for some it meant being able to pull meaning, and interact deeply with a text. Throughout the unit I witnessed evidence of student success, which I recorded in my observation notes, but it wasn't until I interviewed the students in the focus groups that I got a fuller understanding of the numerous successes that students experienced in the class during the unit of study.

As previously noted, the class had a high ratio of students for whom English was a second language. At the time of this study I was an extremely new educator and had little

experience working with students for whom English was a second language. Therefore I feel that I undoubtedly missed out on some opportunities for students to grow and learn during this unit. However, Marvin and Mateo, who were from Mexico, pointed out that playing the game helped with some English language acquisition: “Yeah, some words in English, I learned how to use them because they used them in the game. I would listen to it, but I did not know how to use it, and then they would say it in the game, and it was like, ‘okay, now I get it.’” The combination of the visual, audio, text, and player input cues allowed Marvin to learn new words in English during the unit as they were used in a meaningful context, within the narrative and affordances of the game. Marvin’s experience highlighted how video games, when used in the classroom, can help with language acquisition. Zhao, Li, and Biyu pointed out that this aspect of learning could have been enhanced during the unit. When asked what advice they would give teachers who thought about using video games in the classroom, Zhao spoke for the group saying, “I think the game should have a sub-title.” The use of subtitles in games is common and can usually be set in the game’s home menu screen. However, for this unit I did not think to make sure that all the video games were set to use subtitles. Doing so may have allowed for greater success for students for whom English was a second language.

Another aspect of students’ success that came up during my interviews with students was their ability to connect with the texts or video games that we played during the unit. Students reported that they were able to pull meaning from, and use the information from, video games in order to create their final projects and have meaningful discussions. Sami pointed out that, “I think we had like more stuff to use for our project from the video game rather than like from a book or something.” Kelly expanded on Sami’s idea saying,

“Cause when you’re playing a video game, you like get with the character, and then it would like say something and then you would analyze that, and like find the depth of it, so it’s like more meaning to the story, so it’s like more stuff to talk about, because everyone like played it differently, if that makes sense.”

Both Sami and Kelly spoke for their group’s experience during the unit, pointing out that the use of video games provided them with an opportunity to probe the depth of a text in a way that other texts they had studied had not allowed them. The same focus group commented further on the ways in which the text of the game enabled them to engage deeply with the text in order to fully appreciate the game. Sami informed me that:

“You had to like look into the story and see what was going on. You have to explore the story that’s going on. In *Gone Home* you have to analyze it, and they don’t tell you the story so you have to, like, look into the story. So, it’s good for like movie studies and stuff like that...and poetry even cause like sometimes it doesn’t tell you what’s happening, but you have to go deeper into it to see what’s happening.”

Sami’s ability to recognize that the skills she and her group developed during this unit, and more specifically the way in which those skills could be applied to other activities within the language Arts Classroom, indicates that these students experienced success during this unit. One of the struggles of English Language Arts teachers is finding texts and class activities that encourage students to ‘go deep’ with their learning as opposed to responding to texts in a superficial way. Here I observed that for some participants the use of video games facilitated their ability to develop critical and close reading skills.

In addition to students reporting successful development of individual Language Arts based skills, some students reported that the use of video games helped them to develop their

ability to work in groups. The development of this skill, though not directly connected to the English Language Arts curriculum, is in line with the core competencies that are being stressed as integral part of the entire K through 12 curriculum in British Columbia. As Sam indicated in the community section, the unit in which we used video games helped him learn how to work in a group and contrasted the experience with experiences he had in other classes.

The indication that the use of video games led to the group being able to learn how to better work with others was reflected in many of my focus group discussions, as well as my classroom observations. James, who kept to himself in most instances, pointed out that, “In a school environment it forces me to work with people. It was really interesting, because sometimes people would have trouble getting through levels but I already knew how to get through them.” Here, James is able to work with and help other people in the class, and able to show his expertise where as in other school situations he was not afforded the same opportunity. In this case his experience with the games ensures that he has something of value to offer the other students in the class. The idea that video games can bring people together and help students find success working with one another has been explored in the classroom community section of my findings, however I feel it necessary to mention it again here as it is a concrete example of student success as reported by the students themselves.

Summary from four themes

Teaching the unit, and conducting the focus groups after I had finished, allowed me to see first hand the effects of using video games within a classroom and then gain insights from students after the unit of instruction. It was clear that although much of this particular group of students did not identify as video gamers, the use of video games in the classroom facilitated a number of positive experiences for the students. Students who participated in the study took the

unit seriously, attended frequently, engaged with the material, and produced thoughtful final projects. Some of the projects that were produced included a half hour podcast that explored the representation of teens in media, a visual essay that compared the use of violence as a narrative device in video games to the use of violence in film and television, and an expanded set of journal entries for a character in the game *Gone Home*. The use of video games within the classroom appeared to result in an increased sense of relevance of course materials to students, an increased level of student engagement, better classroom community, and, subsequently student success in multiple ways.

My teacher role: An action research reflective analysis of planning and implementing the Video Game unit

Using an action research approach I built this study in order to discover how the inclusion of traditionally extramural literacies, specifically video games, within the classroom, could facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success. The research question that framed this study was “How does the inclusion of traditionally extramural literacies, specifically video games, within the classroom, facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success?” With regards to this question I was adamant to see how students would respond to the use of video games within the classroom, and the ways in which the incorporation of a typically non-traditional classroom text would be received within an English Language Arts classroom. However, the pursuit of this question also influenced my own teaching practice that will be the highlight below in my teacher insight reflections captured within multiple action research cycles.

Cycle 1

When I first began exploring the possibility of using video games as a key text within an English class I had envisioned that the class in which video games were used would have been a class that students self selected to be a part of due to their interest in video games. My early conversations with students had shown me that many students who self identified as gamers also displayed numerous traditional literacy skills. Many would read long online articles, blogs, and even novels to better understand the game they were playing. Others would write fan fiction, and even argumentative essays centered around certain video games. While they would often engage in these literary activities with regards to their gaming they often found little success in more traditional English Language Arts classrooms. My hope was to create an alternative learning space that utilized video games in order to bridge the gap between students' experiences in school and their true capacities. My literature search, and my own observations, had suggested that the incorporation of video games in the classroom could have direct benefit to student learning, specifically students who had an interest and knowledge about video games themselves. However, the English 10 class in which this study took place was composed of students who, for the most part, did not identify as video gamers. This reality shifted the focus of the study as I now would not solely be looking at the ways in which video games affected learners who had an interest in gaming, but also would focus on learners who may not have recognized video games as something that aligned with their interests. However, this shift in focus did allow me to see the ways in which the introduction of video games in the classroom could affect the learning environment for both gamers and non-gamers. Further, many of the key aspects that I had earlier identified as being beneficial for youth who identified as gamers, manifested as useful to students who did not identify as video gamers.

Cycle 2

What became apparent during the study of the unit is that once I got the video games into the students' hands, that is to say, when students were given the chance to play the video games, the dynamics of the class shifted in the most meaningful and significant ways. It became clear from my observations and from my focus group interviews that the time that students spent playing video games in class was the most engaging, and in fact the most educative for the students. Although the class did not identify as video gamers per se, every student was able to engage with the video games, and play through different games without much difficulty. Further, no student found that the act of playing the games was overly frustrating. This was due to the fact that students supported one another in their learning, and game playing throughout the study. Students who had familiarity with video games supported the other students, and students would work in groups to solve common problems. This suggests that introducing ideas, texts, and topics that students find engaging can create a rich learning environment. In fact, even though many of the students reported themselves as non-gamers, they all displayed a level of gaming literacy that ensured I did not have to teach them how to play the video games. The literacy of gaming was a skill that was previously developed for many of the students who participated in the study. Earlier in this thesis I pointed out that there are a multitude of literacies with which students are proficient. These literacies extend far beyond the traditional 'pen and paper' literacies that are often the focus of English Language Arts classes. Specifically, when I observed students playing video games together it was clear that the students were proficient in many basic gaming literacy tasks. These tasks included: moving their characters through the game world; controlling their character and objects in the game world; advancing the narrative of a game by completing game play tasks; and using the

controllers and system hardware as intended. Thus, although many of the students professed to be non-gamers, it was clear that nearly all of the students in the classroom were proficient with regards to playing video games themselves. This suggested to me that although students may not identify as video gamers themselves students would still be able to engage with video games as texts without expending exorbitant amounts of time teaching gaming literacies. Video games offer students an opportunity to engage meaningfully with narratives, ideas and issues in a way that other mediums do not allow.

Cycle 3

Further to these observed video game specific literacies, I also noticed the students engaging in more traditional literary activities while playing video games in class. Some of these activities included: using visual and written clues in the game world in order to decode narrative aspects of the game; discussing ideas, themes, narrative beats, and character traits; tracking the narrative of the game; and conferring within their group and with other groups in the classroom in order to more fully piece together the games' narrative. It seemed that students understood how to interact with video games more completely than I had originally predicted. I was unsure if they had learned these skills on their own or in other classes. Observing this I shifted my practice I began allowing more time for group play, and collaborative work, and included less teacher led instructional time within each class. Students were applying many of the textual decoding techniques that are often used in order to make sense of written texts, and applying them to the texts of the video games. Students did this on their own accord. Aside from an initial lesson where we explored the ways in which we decode different forms of media, there was no explicit instruction about how to make sense of the games they were playing. Students naturally engaged in discussions and conversations about the games they were

playing without prompting from me as a teacher. In fact I found that the richest discussions occurred during the times that students were playing the video games. Student conversations became a rich tool for critical analysis, deep learning, and communicating, especially when these conversations were allowed to occur organically without constant interruption or direction from the teacher. Conversely, when I facilitated whole class discussions centered on a specific theme or idea surrounding the games we were playing, the conversations were far more stilted and students were visibly less engaged. Discussions were much richer when they occurred organically and when students were in smaller groups. I found that the most impactful learning occurred during these moments, as students felt more comfortable discussing aspects of the games' while playing them, and in an environment that was not prescribed by myself. I sat in on some of these conversations and used the opportunity to direct some of their thinking by asking questions and calling attention to various concepts and ideas. As a teacher I realized that for myself, the most valuable educational moments occurred in these spaces -- speaking to students in smaller settings about things that they were actively engaged in. This shifted my teaching practice and I consciously began to create spaces for students to discuss ideas in less traditionally formal settings.

Playing Together: Linking theme for study

One key myth surrounding education is that learning has to be difficult in order to be beneficial. My study has shown me that play can encourage far more learning opportunities than the normal school rhetoric of hard work and perseverance. I observed that leaning can be a joy, and students' learn best when they are having fun. During the study I witnessed students continually communicating with one another while playing the games. Thus, even though some games only required one person to be physically in control of the game, the entire group

remained engaged with the act of playing the game. These skills that were observed by me during the unit pointed to the fact that youth have enough familiarity with video games that introducing video games into the classroom allows for students to explore complex aspects of the games' narratives in an immediate way or with guidance from their peers. While playing games, students discuss aspects of character, narrative, and some thematic ideas organically without the discussions being led by the teacher. Once I was able to get out of the way, and simply let the students play the video games together, and in some cases play with them as an observer and commentator, much of the learning and classroom behaviors that I aspired for in my classes started to emerge. I simply had to create a space where students could engage meaningfully with texts that they felt connected to.

What I discovered during the unit was that the most important factor of teaching with video games was creating a space where students could play video games in groups together. Although video games are often seen as singular activities gamers often create unique community spaces centered on their video game play. During the unit of study I witnessed the many ways in which the act of playing video games as a group can unify and bring together a group of students in unique and unexpected ways. Some students, who did not normally speak with one another, had meaningful interactions on multiple occasions while the class was playing video games. This is of great import as it provides students with an opportunity to engage with all members of the class, moving outside their comfort zone in a safe manner, and thus creating a more inclusive classroom community. This connects to the personal and social and communication core competencies outlined in the new British Columbia curriculum. Students had to work together in order to find success in the game worlds and they did so without any prompting from me as the teacher. Students worked together because they felt it necessary to

fully experiencing the video games that they played. During the time in which students played video games in the class the students who reported as being active video gamers were often able to adopt a mentorship role for the students who did not identify as video gamers. The video gamers in the class would often provide support for other students who may have found themselves confounded by a particular portion of the game, acting as guides and providing useful hints. Students who adopted this role reported having to learn ways in which to provide their peers with enough support so that they could advance through the game without fully providing those students with the solutions. Tony pointed out that, “If you know what you’re doing, and you are watching someone who doesn’t know what they’re doing, but you don’t want to help them, because you want them to figure it out for themselves.” This balance between providing support, and still allowing students to figure it out on their own is a tension that every educator must grapple with while working in school. In this instance the students were able to assume the role of teacher within the classroom. Students in the class became the teachers of the game, and I adopted a new role of teaching students how to further recognize the concepts and ideas that the games were presenting. The adoption of a teaching role by the students points to the ways in which the introduction of extramural literacies, in this instance video games can serve to decentralize the the locus of power within a classroom community. Students become teachers for one another, each student contributing in unique ways, and the teacher becomes a facilitator for student growth as opposed to an arbiter of facts and knowledge. Students reported enjoying playing video games as a group as it allowed them to combine their ideas and more fully appreciate the games’ narratives and puzzles. Further, students in the study reported that the act of playing games with one another in a class setting

taught them how to work with one another, and that working/playing in a group was an important skill that they felt was too often ignored in other classes.

Interaction between Community, Engagement, Relevance, and Student Success

After transcribing and analyzing the focus group transcripts I was able to establish four major emerging themes from the data. My research question “ How does the inclusion of traditionally extramural literacies, specifically video games, within the classroom, facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success?” led me to look at certain categories of student engagement, community, and student success that were core elements of my teaching philosophy. These initial sub-themes were relevance, community, student success, and engagement structured my analysis. I realized that each of these themes linked into one another, and each emerging element is reliant on the other. What became clear during my conversations with students is that each of these sub-themes represents a necessary element for meaningful educational experiences for students. The students I spoke to yearn for classroom experiences that build a sense of community, are engaging and relevant, and ultimately contribute to their success. Many students in the study articulated the fact that most of their classroom experiences do not address these aspects, and are therefore not valued by the students. However, when talking about their experiences during the unit where they were given the opportunity to engage with video games, each group reported that at least two if not all of these elements were addressed. For the students who participated in the study, the introduction of video games increased a sense of classroom community; made classroom activities relevant to their own lives; increased their feeling of engagement; and, ultimately supported their success as students. Critically my practice as a language arts teacher shifted. As I began to decenter my role as teacher the main theme of “Playing together” emerged. As my practice shifted students

were enabled to take on the role of teacher with regards to video games and the classroom. This allowed the big issues related to teenage student lives to emerge and be explored.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Recommendations

It is clear, as a result of this study that too often students feel disconnected and ambivalent about the activities that occur within the high school classroom. Students in this study reflected how they often feel disconnected from their own learning, and report feeling a distinct lack of agency over their own education. Educators are continually searching for ways in which to make classroom experiences meaningful for their students. The new 21st Century Education plan that is being implemented throughout BC seeks to find ways to personalize learning and adapt classroom activities so that they are more congruent with 21st century skills such as problem solving, empathy for others, creative thinking and collaboration. As educators search for ways to make the classroom a more meaningful place for students to be, one of the key ways that this can be achieved is by finding meaningful ways to incorporate their interests inside of the classroom. This means that teachers need to be willing to become vulnerable enough to allow the interests of their students to shape the dynamics of the classroom. Listening to students and tailoring classroom activities to the needs and interests of the students can drastically shift the dynamics of any classroom. One of the key focuses of this study was to build on the work of educators who had come before me and had found ways to incorporate student interest in meaningful ways into their classrooms. I had seen educators incorporate hip-hop, television, film, art, and social media into their classrooms with great success. It was refreshing to see the incorporation of various non-traditional texts in classrooms, and witnessing the positive response from students encouraged me to explore ways in which I could incorporate students' interests into classrooms in meaningful ways. I was fortunate in that I was privy to concrete examples of teachers using student interests as the foundation of their lessons. These experiences encouraged me to explore other ways that students extramural interests could be

incorporated into classroom activities, and provided me with a framework for how to do that effectively.

I identified video games as a significant area of interest for many students, and one that had not been, in any way I could see, meaningfully incorporated into any classroom. My familiarity with video games allowed me to see some of the ways in which video games could inform classroom learning. During my years as a pre-service teacher, my conversation with students about their video game play revealed that students engaged in a multitude of activities that met the prescribed learning outcomes for English Language Arts in British Columbia while playing video games. However, for many of these students, their classroom experiences did not afford them opportunities to demonstrate this knowledge, and they had become disinterested in their classes, and sometimes convinced that they were in fact ‘poor students’. These conversations, along with my involvement in Kathy Sanford and Tim Hopper’s (2012-16) *Youth Civic Engagement: Real Life Learning Through Virtual Games Environments* study helped to inform my creation of an English Language Arts unit where video games were used as the primary texts. It was my intention to use the unit as a way to engage students who had become disengaged with Language Arts class, but had a distinct interest in video games. However, the English 10 class that I worked with for this study consisted mostly of students who did not identify as video gamers. This did not actually hinder the study as it allowed me to understand how video games can benefit any student, not only those who may self-identify as video gamers. The research question that this study addressed was “ How does the inclusion of traditionally extramural literacies, specifically video games, within the classroom, facilitate student engagement, the creation of classroom community, and foster student success?” Teaching the unit, and interviewing the students afterwards about their experiences, informed

my to understanding of how video games, and the emerging teacher's practice, can be a useful tool in an English Language Arts classroom. These findings have resulted in me making the following recommendations as a result of what I learnt during this study:

1. Use video games in the classroom to enable more personalized learning where the teacher becomes a facilitator of deep thinking enabled by video games.
2. More research should be done with regards to teaching English as a second language using video games as a vehicle for student engagement and collaboration.
3. There should be a shift in classrooms to more authentically incorporate students' extramural literacies to nurture more relevance in student's learning.

Use Video Games in the classroom

This study made it clear that educators should use video games in their classrooms. Using video games in the classroom benefits students who identify as gamers, as well as students who do not identify as video gamers. The use of video games within the classroom creates a sense of classroom community, increases engagement, and encourages student success. I would suggest that these results would occur not only in an English Language Arts classroom, but would work equally well in any subject classroom. Educators who are searching for ways to incorporate 21st century literacies, which is prescribed as necessary by the new British Columbia curriculum, should look to find meaningful ways to incorporate video games into their classroom practice. For example, video games could be included in social studies classes (Never Alone, Papers Please), science classes (Spore, Sim Earth, Portal), careers courses (Flight Simulator), and used in many interdisciplinary ways.

For too long many educators have clung to the narrative that video games are a negative force with regards to education. It is clear that youths' interactions with video games are complex and meaningful, and that they should be taken seriously and included in the classroom.

Using video games to teach English as a second language

One of the most striking aspects for me in this study was the learning that occurred regarding teaching English Language learners. The reality of today's British Columbia classroom is that for a significant percentage of our students English is a second or even third or fourth language. There is a growing number of international students enrolling in British Columbia classrooms and many educators do not have experience or expertise in working with students for whom English is a second language. As an educator I am constantly learning about how to work with students, and during this unit I began to see that I know very little with regards as to how ensure success for our English Language learners. However, the students that participated in this study insightfully to let me know the ways in which video games helped and could further help other students who are English Language learners. The use of subtitles in some games helped some students expand their English vocabulary, though for some of the games the subtitles were not turned on. In the future I would recommend using video games with sub-titles in order that English Language Learners can both see and hear the words that are being used. Further, as video games are inherently interactive, students reported learning language via the video games contextual clues. Hearing the language and interacting with it directly in order to further the narrative of the game helped students better understand the meaning of certain words. It is my belief that video games, especially games that the students themselves play, can be used to facilitate English Language learning within the classroom.

Playing video games within the class requires students to interact with both the game itself, which is helpful, but also, and perhaps most importantly with one another. The video game provides a basis for student interaction within the classroom, and can be used as a low stakes way for students to get to know one another. The use of the video game as a medium shifts the focus of attention and interaction away from the students themselves, which many students are apprehensive to engage in, to the game itself, which offers much less personal vulnerability to the students. Students can discuss the ways in which they can succeed in the world of the video game, without feeling as if they have to expose personal aspects of self. If I had the opportunity to teach the unit again, I would have organized the groups so that more international and non-international students were paired together. It is my recommendation that future studies be dedicated to the further exploration of the use of video games with learners for whom English is a second language.

Meaningfully including extramural literacies in classrooms

The inclusion of student interests within the classroom is now a necessity. Considering the wealth of information which supports the fact that learners learn best when the subject matter is directly connected to their own lives, there is little excuse for not finding ways to meaningfully include students' interests and passions within the classroom. The extramural activities in which students' engage are often complex and sophisticated, requiring youth to learn a variety of skills and apply copious amounts of information between various texts. Many of the skills with which youth willingly engage while nurturing their interests are the very same skills that educators are so desperate to foster within their classrooms. Some of these skills include: cooperation and teamwork; intertextual transfer; analysis and response; critical thinking; and creative production. Harnessing and nurturing these skills is the goal of many

educators, yet often the means to foster these skills within the classroom remains elusive.

However, if educators can find ways to meaningfully include students' interests as part of their daily classroom practices they will be able to help students further develop the skills that are so integral to student success. However it is imperative that educators do not compromise by including educational versions of student interests.

One of the greatest mistakes that educators make when trying to incorporate extramural literacies into their classrooms is that they only use 'made for school' versions of student interests as class materials. For example, often students who are interested in graphic novels are often given graphic novel versions of canonical works of literature as opposed to being allowed to explore titles that are relevant to their own lives. This sanitization of student interest is inauthentic and suggests that students' interests are not in fact relevant to what happens within a school. This factor is especially true with regards to video games. If educators are going to consider using video games in their classrooms they must not be games that have been designed strictly for 'educational purposes'. These kinds of video games do not resonate with youth and reinforce the notion that the things with which youth engage have little relevance or place within the classroom. The inclusion of extramural materials that students choose should be used in the classroom, and this must not be compromised by the teacher's lack of familiarity with the material, as students will often not respond to materials that they see making limited connections to their lives.

The genuine inclusion of students' extramural interests can lead to numerous benefits for students. When students are given the opportunity to engage meaningfully with their interests in a classroom setting they become invested in their own learning. The inclusion of video games in the classroom, which is of particular interest for many of today's students, has shown in this

study to be an effective tool for creating engaging learning spaces. (Squire, 2005) This study has shown that the inclusion of video games in the classroom benefits students who report to have interest in video games, as well as students who report to not being avid video gamers. I would suggest that the introduction of extramural literacies, such as hip-hop, anime, graffiti, television and film etc. within the classroom can have a meaningful and positive impact on students' in class experiences.

Conclusion

Educators working in today's classrooms face a new set of challenges, and have been presented with numerous new opportunities in order to provide meaningful educative experiences for their students. Specifically, teachers in British Columbia have a unique opportunity to reshape pedagogy and classroom experiences for the benefit of students. The new BC curriculum provides teachers with expanded options and ideas for ways to create meaningful experiences within their classrooms. It is clear that students need to feel personally connected to their own learning. As educators seek to create spaces that their students can find success, they should consider using the students' themselves as resources and co-creators of their classroom curriculum. Identifying student interest and finding meaningful ways to incorporate those interests into the classroom can have a dramatic affect on student learning and student success. This study has shown that the incorporation of video games, a passion for many contemporary students, results in numerous positive effects for students. Some of these include effects on classroom community, student engagement, and student success.

This seed for this study was planted when I was a pre-service teacher. It began on a whim that perhaps I could use video games in the same way that teachers used novels in the English Language Arts classrooms. I had recognized that video games had become increasingly

narratively complex, and I had the distinct sense that there was enough thematic narrative substance that games could be examined critically as art. Of course my initial ideas for the ways in which video games could be used in the classroom were still heavily influenced by my experiences as an English Humanities undergrad student. I clung to the ideas that the most important aspect of using video games in the classroom was that they could serve as a gateway to “great literature”. I had envisioned using video games as a springboard of sorts, where students who played through *Bio Shock* would suddenly become compelled to read the works of Dostoevsky. In my head video games would serve as a catalyst for meaningful and deep connections with literature. However, once I began talking with youth, and as I became involved in Sanford and Hopper’s longitudinal study focused on *Youth Civic Engagement: Real Life Learning through Virtual Games Environments*, I realized that simply studying video games as pieces of literature was limiting the scope of what was possible. There were, I came to realize, a wide variety of complex activities associated with video game play. Youth would engage in complex literary, intertextual, interpersonal tasks both during video game play and surrounding video game play. The youth I spoke to had a lot to say about their experiences with and surrounding their video game play. Those conversations along with my involvement in the study shaped this project. They helped solidify in my mind that there was a place for video games inside of the classroom above and beyond their connection to canonical texts.

Completing this study has shifted the way I think about my teaching practice. I have become aware of the power of genuinely incorporating student interest into the classroom. I have seen how the use of video games can shift the dynamics of a classroom, inviting students to interact and learn from one another in unique and powerful ways. I have come to see that my role as a teacher is to serve as a guide working with students’ prior knowledge, interests, gifts

and talents in order to create meaningful educative experiences. Finally, I have come to understand that by being vulnerable, and being willing to learn from and with students, I can co-create the kinds of generative learning spaces that I had hoped to nurture when I first began my journey as an educator six years ago. Video games may seem like an unlikely source to serve as the genesis for these understandings, but my experiences using video games in the class and talking to youth about their experiences with video games, has shown me the power of using video games in a classroom. It is my hope that more teachers explore the potential of using video games in their classrooms, finding new and unique ways to create meaningful educational experiences for their students. I believe we have only begun to scratch the surface of possibility with regards to the use of video games in the classroom.

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