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### Inquiry Project

...[A]fter a certain kind of sherry party, where there have been cataracts of *culture* but never one word or one glance that suggested a real enjoyment of any art, any person, or any natural object, my heart warms to the schoolboy on the bus who is reading *Fantasy and Science Fiction*, rapt and oblivious of all the world beside. For here also I should feel that I had met something real and live and unfabricated; genuine literary experience, spontaneous and compulsive, disinterested. I should have hopes of that boy (Lewis 39).

I never fail to be amazed by how much C. S. Lewis' works relate to the thoughts and ideas going through my head. I've been thinking about how video games and writing can be brought together in the classroom for over a month, and a challenging point of view I've tried adopting says, "Why video games? Shouldn't we just stick with literature? Won't it be more harmful to experiment with an entertainment medium like this?" Sometimes I've thought of conceding to these concerns, but then I remember the majority of students growing up now are more engrossed and – at the very least – knowledgeable of games than ever before. Academic fields and scholarly criticism about games increase in practitioners by the day. The game industry itself is a booming entertainment business rife with job opportunities and creative possibilities; the products that come from it are mechanically, visually, and narratively complex every year. I'm emboldened by Lewis' words along with these developments in the game industry and

culture. Had I not been consumed by the escapism and power of games, I don't know where I would be as a writer. They're considerably responsible for my career path and guide my professional and personal interests in English. If that's indeed the case, who's to say academic acceptance and usage of games in the writing classroom wouldn't engage students in ways literature cannot? I know this to be true, even with some who may only display a passing interest in the medium. But can games (whether with their stories, gameplay, etc.) uniquely help and encourage students to bolster their creativity and skill with writing? In addition, do they have a place in the teaching of writing with our digital age and generation of students interacting and communicating through technology? These questions have framed my own research of relevant scholarly publications, questionnaires I sent several English teachers, and data I acquired from my own experimental assignment teaching creative writing with *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim* game. What I've found stretches thin in some cases, but I've nevertheless broached a breadth of topics and discussions that shed light on the pros and cons of teaching writing with games.

### **Social Communication & Space**

One of my teacher interviewees, Sarah (all names are pseudonyms), believes there is “a whole ecology of written genres surrounding [students'] play that also inform gameplay (paratexts), which are often online and therefore accessible for students to study.” Indeed, player-written game guides, sprawling discussion forums, and communities of authors writing fan fiction surround every game one could imagine. Simulating or actively participating in real versions of these spaces for a class are real opportunities to push students' abilities to describe detail and instructions through expository writing with game guides. Discussion forums can lead to “trans-literacies” that make players consider “how certain literacy and rhetorical skills might

transfer to other writing environments” and how “to make connections about the skills they are developing and their potential usefulness outside the context of the games” (Alexander 46). Sarah’s mention of paratexts extends to other research involving creative writing and collaborative writing. Jonathan Alexander, a University of California professor of English and *College Composition and Communication* editor, conducted an analysis of two *World of Warcraft* players. While he declined (for understandable reasons) to elaborate on his research for this study, his past dabbling in contrasting English and video games is profound. In asking the players about how they communicate with friends involving the game, he observed that “the [discussion] boards serve not only ‘strategic’ gaming purposes but also contribut[i]ons to community and relationship building” (46). Debates about in-game leadership and goals to positive and negative criticism for custom character stories and chapters can be discovered in these rich communities. I could only think of Sarah when she told me this exposes students to “a discourse community in action” that can reveal elements of rhetoric with argumentation. They can see how meanings specific to certain groups are used, interpreted, and changing. Even “good” writing that a community upholds can test students’ own perceptions of writing and how they can improve their own.

One interviewee only directed me to her own publicized research with her colleague, and social space is an area they cover. Dr. Hannah Gerber – an associate professor of Literacy at Sam Houston State University – and Dr. Sandra Abrams – an associate professor of Adolescent Education at St. John’s University – Sarah’s opinions about the potential of paratexts, writing that students can “witness and critique the extension, manipulation, and modification of language, concepts, and themes on fan-based or publisher sites. [...] As such, young adults are

engaged in enriching (and often collaborative) experiences and opportunities to experiment with literacy and subsequently create new texts from the ones that they are reading” (20). With video games being a multimodal platform, it’s natural that various multimedia communities and communication could be exploited to engage gaming or non-gaming students in social spaces involved in all manners of writing that could aid in multiple types of writing classrooms. Prolific author and professor of Literacy Studies at Arizona State University James Paul Gee is well known for his book *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning And Literacy*. His chapter “The Social Mind” only stresses the necessity of engaging these spaces students are familiar with and partake in regularly.

So learning here is social, distributed, and part and parcel of a network composed of interconnected people, tools, technologies, and companies. [...] Yet schools isolate children from such powerful networks...test[ing] and assess[ing] them as isolated individuals, apart from other people and apart from tools and technologies that they could leverage to powerful ends (188).

In other words, not only are these networks intimately engaged by students of today in their personal lives, but they’re also increasingly relevant to the workforce in terms of communication, so skills learned with social media, software, digital tools, and more translate to better efficiency on the job. Teaching writing encourages this, and video games seem a fitting conduit to channel this with the elaborate social spaces they provide.

### **Semiotic Domains & Multiple Literacies**

In acknowledging these social spaces, I’ve already touched upon the various literacies they instigate, but video games in themselves can bring this about apart from communities due to

their semiotic domains. Gee describes them as “any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities to communicate types of meaning.” Words, actions, sounds, movements...these are examples of signs that take on particular meanings within particular domains, and he says “print literacy is not enough. People need to be literate in a great variety of different semiotic domains. [...] If our modern, global, high-tech, and science-driven world does anything, it certainly gives rise to new semiotic domains and transforms old ones at an ever faster rate” (19-20). What I mean to say with Gee is that the social spaces of games have their semiotic domains, but playing video games requires certain knowledge with their intrinsic domains, too. They can be navigated and learned by newcomers, which allows everyone the opportunity to “develop a sense of how text and visuals interact; many games provide a rich environment in which gamers are developing and (pardon the pun) playing with a variety of complex literacy skills” (Alexander 36). Sarah informed me that she’s constructing an assignment that has “students do a rhetorical analysis of the affordances and constraints of a videogame in creating arguments and compare it with a written text. [...] For instance, what types of arguments could they make with the game that they couldn't make with the editorial and vice versa and why?” Video games are a phenomenal way to initiate reflectivity of traditional texts with how they present narrative, characters, action, visuals, and more. With these ideas in mind, it adds greater reason to utilize games to be where students are with their means of communication. It allows them to take these further and understand that multiple literacies are larger in number and more natural to practice, which the writing classroom should take advantage of.

These multiple literacies can be seen in the social spheres surrounding games, and they’re applicable to “real life” and our digitally-inclined culture. Alexander wrote that this “gives us a

significant opportunity to examine complex literate and rhetorical work in action. But more than this, paying attention to gaming and the ‘gaming lives’ of students powerfully invites students to speak with us about how ‘literacy’ itself is changing” (37). Indeed, he quotes an article titled *Computer Gaming as Literacy* that claims “Young people’s literacy activity in the *semiotic domain* [emphasis mine] of gaming may prepare them to operate, communicate, and exchange information effectively in a world that is increasingly digital and transnational—and in ways that their formal school does not” (40). Gerber and Dr. Debra Price – an associate dean at Sam Houston State University – argue that games allow for opportunities of expository, persuasive, and creative writing (69-72), and Alexander provides a whole chart of literacies he observed in *World of Warcraft*, ranging from literacy reflectivity (communication prioritization during gameplay), trans-literacies (using outside communication to guide in-game communication, like with game groups called clans or guilds), collaborative writing (contributing to discussions about a game on forums and game guides), multicultural literacies (being able to work together with people of different races and languages online), and critical literacies (analyzing a game’s narrative themes or design to examine ideologies, conflict, or debate), and more (45). My interviewee Sarah surprised me with even more by citing examples that opened my eyes to how expansive literacies can be and how games can go beyond the positive impacts of traditional texts. In mentioning Alexander’s literacies, she says that “gamers can intuitively grasp a mode’s communicative affordances and constraints” well, and another example of a literacy is “simulation, or the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. [...] Another is multitasking – ‘the ability to scan the environment and shift focus onto salient details.’ Another is judgement – ‘the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different

information sources.’ [...] research, or theory craft [...] is also highly prized.” The modes in which games can put students in with their semiotic domains further reveal that the lines between play and the writing process are not so divided with these literacies they share in common. And one such literacy Sarah mentions is also intrinsic to what games are, which stimulates “the ability to effectively read and communicate across modes.” This is multimodality.

### **Multimodality**

Since video games are a culmination of media (sound, visuals, story, gameplay, etc.) with the prominent distinction of meaningful interaction, Sarah told me this about multimodality.

Videogames probably explore the affordances of multimodal texts more than any other medium, particularly because they employ some of the same visual and aural techniques of film, but they also open up spatial and kinesthetic modalities as well. Furthermore, [...] players are positioned with a particular ethos which actually embodies a particular ideology. In an effectively designed game, this ideology is reinforced by everything within the game: the sound, the graphics, the mechanics of the actual gameplay, the game's interface, the game's narrative, the choices offered to the player in that narrative, the other non-player characters (NPCs) in the game, etc.

This means that students can not only analyze the story or “text” in a game to practice and learn about writing, but also the messages and themes the artistic direction, game mechanics, and music might mean. There’s the added dimension of interactivity to consider as well. With role-playing games that stress customization and emergent stories that adapt to the player’s actions and decisions, the ways in which his or her experience unfolds can be differently interpreted and personally felt from individual to individual. I can slightly attest to these assertions in an

experimental assignment involving creative writing and the role-playing game *The Elders Scrolls V: Skyrim*. After my student wrote a short story from playing the game for three hours, she primarily focused on an NPC, the main narrative, and her character's backstory. However, she told me she would've written more for the "real thing." In particular, she highlighted a moment where the music complements a gorgeous scene that stuck out to her. It made her feel at peace and in awe, which is a perfect example of elements outside of the story contributing to her creative writing.

In regards to the narrative construction aspect of games, Zovera Ann Jackson penned a journal for *Kairos: A Journal of Rhetoric, Technology, and Pedagogy*, writing "composition theorists Schwartz and Bishop cite the need for play if students are to become authors of meaningful text. Bishop argues that, 'we need to be crossing the line between composition and the use of multi-media far more often than we do. In fact we need to eliminate the line entirely'" ("Connecting"). She goes on to additionally cite Marcia Halio's research and how she experimented using multimedia with first-year composition students. Jackson says her process "sparked students to think holistically with their senses and with their generalizing intelligence. [...] Many students who wrote abstractly and generally became more specific. Also those students who were experiencing writer's block became unblocked by using the multimedia writing process to think of themselves as authors" ("Connecting"). Multimodal *play* takes this a step further, personally involving the player in the construction of the experience. Multimedia texts like games pull in more of the writer's senses and self, which open up opportunities to respond more naturally. Another interviewee, Tom, agreed this is possible as a literature teacher himself.

In my Literature courses, rather than analyzing poems and stories, students are usually

writing about their own experiences and opinions on issues and comparing/contrasting to those found in the pieces. I think that video games can be another form of this kind of activity. [...] I think the principle is the same, and the fact that many students are interested in video games means that the students allows them to connect naturally to the assignment without having to learn, for example, how to respond to a sculpture or understand a poem.

Multimedia, or games in particular, are means to reach the social spaces, semiotic domains, and multiple literacies discussed thus far. My observations in the creative writing *Skyrim* assignment give credence to these claims.

### **Creative Writing**

In regards to creative writing with games, Gerber and Price advise “Students could write poetry, musical lyrics, short stories, or screenplays. They could begin their writing process by examining what they know about the story and game, and then furthering that by sketching out new characters and plot twists or new settings” (71-72). Before stumbling upon this passage, I had already put together the *Skyrim* assignment to gauge if games can effectively promote creative writing. I personally value the heart behind storytelling and the emotions, personal history, and imagination students are capable of pouring into their work. I attempted to show with the assignment that books may allow readers to occupy and relate to the perspectives of characters, but games allow players to mix their identities with those of their characters, projecting and living out themselves in these digital worlds to varying degrees. My student played three hours of *Skyrim* and put together a story I didn’t completely expect. Instead of highlighting big story moments such as a dragon attack, sword fights, and almost being executed,

she decided to focus on her character's feelings toward a non-playable character who rescues her near the beginning. "Ralof came to help me. I did not understand why he was choosing to help me. He had the perfect opportunity to escape, but he chose to stay," she wrote, writing with plural instead of singular pronouns for the rest of her draft to symbolize her cooperation with Ralof. He became an integral part of her character's world when most would see him as a side character to be forgotten, but due to a personal backstory of isolation and introversion she crafted due to the race she chose to represent herself (which might just reflect my student's own tendencies to introversion), she made a touching, hopeful narrative highlighting the influential impact that simple, kind gestures can have on others who have lost hope. "After all he and I went through," she wrote, "I did not want to leave him. He was my...friend. My first friend. But I had this feeling that I would see him again someday. Ralof's kindness had shown me that maybe I was wrong all along. Maybe I did not have to live in the shadows anymore."

From *Inside Out: Strategies for Teaching Writing*, Dawn Kirby and Darren Crovitz's insistence that life is a story and creativity is in everything we do struck me (307-309). I believe every person can be a storyteller and that creativity is embedded in our business emails to our personal diary entries. When teachers stoke the embers of this subconscious creativity in all their students with creative writing, fires of imagination can erupt. Jackson echoes these sentiments of narrative being part of our everyday lives because they drive the human race, and we love them for their multiplicity and how important they are to us as interpretations of society, experience, beauty, and morality ("Connecting"). However, her most important about video games and teaching narrative is the "retellability" of game stories due to their partially malleable nature. Whether stories are told orally or in writing, there's always a process of transformation that

involves the writer. With video games, the writer *and* audience are involved as well, and the lines between them both are blurred.

[T]he increasing versatility of video games due to enhanced story-lines offer the possibility to let players not only retell a predefined story but also modify or even create it as it is being experienced. When such story-telling applications are created, they will increase the level of engagement for people and further blur the line between story-teller and audience (“Connecting”).

In retelling the general beginning of *Skryim*, my student crafted her own version of it in the process. The reader became the author in a sense: a powerful opportunity only games afford. In relation to this, Sarah told me that more research needs to be conducted with the relationship between the writing process and playing games. “I think gaming has the potential to be incredibly important in the invention part of the writing process. I think play and critical thinking are inextricably linked.” With my scant observations for a small experiment, I can already tell this line of questioning should be pursued with far deeper research.

### **The Downfalls**

All of these unique advantages and perspectives games can bring to the writing classroom are exciting to consider, but that’s not to say they don’t bring problems alongside them. Sarah told me that the overwhelming content of video games as multimodal texts can be “unwieldy” and lose students in a sea of analyses. Common issues of students assuming games are easy and cannot be taken seriously arise, as I have personally witnessed with peers while pursuing my Games and Interactive Media Design degree at High Point University. For students who are prominent game fans, addiction is a converse problem if the “texts” in question pertain to games

they love. Both Sarah and Alexander mention how the real and perceived demographic of games being a “male” hobby persists in education. That is, men are usually the dominant gender in classrooms involving games, but the stereotype hinders diversity and the types of discussions and content students can benefit from. An overarching concern that abounds is accessibility and familiarity with games. Sarah says she has to plan for students who might not be able to understand or appropriately play games in the classroom. Jackson notes that students might not be able to “effectively evaluate games and their storytelling,” even adding a unique problem with creative writing that students might reveal too much personal information with narrative-like assignments (“Connecting”). This is something I’ve considered with my *Skyrim* assignment and how my student might have felt uncomfortable with the openness I encouraged her to share in completing it. While she didn’t display any discomfort or issues with this, I imagine this would be a larger concern if I were to utilize the assignment in a real class. Tom told me “not all students may be familiar with or interested in video games. I teach students whose ages range from 18 to 65 and beyond, and there may be some older students who are not interested in or familiar with gaming or, like me, frozen in time when it comes to games.” He mentions other concerns such as “the availability of technology” and cost issues, and I concede these are legitimate concerns that I have wrestled with on my own. He agrees that the “storytelling and character focus of many modern games can lead to interesting writing assignments, but there is a knowledge base regarding video games that students with which the students would need to be conversant in order to write effective essays.” Gerber and Abrams also acknowledge the “strain of or frustration with technological difficulties” (22) and Alexander relates to “Other instructors [who] are going to worry that what I am proposing will not work for them because, quite simply,

they have never played a game before” (60).

Despite these concerns, Gerber and Abrams argue “the digital native–digital immigrant dichotomy no longer should contribute to the digital divide in the classroom. Embracing contemporary texts from the page to the screen is imperative for a participatory popular culture to exist inside the classroom” (23). Sarah told me that despite her concerns, “Games should generate joy and, as a result, further academic engagement - not be a torture.” Alexander boldly encourages English teachers by claiming they have “a rich opportunity to show their students how they...approach and acquire new literacy skills. [...] A willingness to introduce and invite such texts into the classroom may lead more profoundly and productively to collaboration and mutual learning between teachers and students” (60). The trepidation and caution exercised by teachers in this regard is a real obstacle with games being implemented into teaching writing, but even though my student showed no personal interest or had experience playing games with the *Skyrim* assignment, she constructed a substantial story draft after only three hours of play. To think what could be done? My minimal research has only bolstered my hopes.

### **Not Game Over**

There’s one interviewee I have not referred to yet. I’ll call him Luke, and he teaches grammar, mechanics, and even format styles through small games he designs. While he didn’t have time to reply with substantive feedback to my research questions, I find one of his remarks about his reasons for doing this profound.

What I think is the key with video games is that every mistake in a game immediately becomes a learning opportunity. People are afraid of making mistakes on things like homework and tests, or even in class discussions, but they are not generally afraid of

making mistakes in video games. It's my believe [sic] that once students can get past that fear of "losing face" in front of their peers, they are more willing to make a mistake.

I believe this willingness to be unafraid is a byproduct of using games in the writing classroom. Games are about learning from failures and adapting to succeed during play. Because of their multimodal nature, I would argue this effect on players transitions to the writing process itself, giving students confidence to let their voices be heard, whether it be through arguments, stories, exposition, or other means of writing. By allowing students the chance to participate in technological social spaces and semiotic domains, teachers and students can engage multiple literacies in myriad ways. However, in my research, I encountered more questions as I dug deeper. Can video games stimulate multicultural conversation and make the classroom more diverse in student composition according to race or gender? What can teachers exactly do to use video games in conjunction with teaching traditional literature? How is the writing process distinctly influenced by play? What are other downfalls to using games that might challenge my findings? There's more beyond the scope of my research, but from my beginning observations, video games can indeed help and encourage students to bolster their creativity and skill with writing, and they do have a place in the teaching of writing when considering this technological age.

When we bring games into the writing classroom, Gerber and Price write that teachers are “understanding and validating these experiences, and by allowing students to write on topics about which they are passionate and knowledgeable as an impetus and platform for writing multiple genres for multiple audiences, teachers may help students become more proficient writers and even enjoy a subject that they may have at one time dreaded” (72). This is why and

how the teaching of writing can level up into the future.

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