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Thinking like Writers and Critics

How Adolescent Boys Experience Narrative-Driven Games

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Abstract

Boys' interests, values, and motivations are increasingly at odds with those of traditional classrooms. Video games, which have become an integral part of boy culture (Watkins, 2009), have the capacity to cultivate and develop literacy skills (Steinkuehler, 2010). This qualitative study thus investigates how adolescent boys play and learn within commercial-off-the-shelf game spaces. In particular, this paper reports on the study's third phase and focuses on how narrative-driven games provide boys with safe platforms to think about and discuss literary moments. Findings suggest that players naturally analyze and critique the games' narrative structures both during and after regular gameplay.

Introduction and Project Background

When compared to their female counterparts, school-aged boys continue to underperform on national literacy assessments (Rampey, Dion, & Donahue, 2009). They similarly lag behind in Language Arts classrooms—where they feel that their interests and values are at odds with course content and expectations (Steinkuehler, 2010). After all, schools tend to champion narrow definitions of what constitutes reading and writing (Alvermann, 2006; Gee, 2000). Print literacies have remained the focus, and, consequently, teachers often overlook and underestimate the indigenous literary practices and skills of their game-playing boys. As many scholars note, video games themselves can and should be viewed as texts that encourage new forms of reading and writing (Gee, 2007; Jones & Hafner, 2012). They not only have the potential to bridge and complement traditional literacies (Abrams, 2012; O'Brien & Scharber, 2008), but these video games could also serve as academic content in Language Arts classrooms (Gerber & Price, 2011; Ostenson, 2013).

Over the past three years, our work has sought to uncover and describe the meaning-making and learning practices of these adolescent gamers. More specifically, we have investigated how their experiences within popular commercial-off-the-shelf (COTS) games like *Call of Duty* and *Assassin's Creed* can potentially align with the aims and methods of Language Arts instructors. In addition, we have attempted to unpack and understand how boys "morph" school-based literacy practices into more socially acceptable forms (Blair & Sanford, 2004). In earlier phases of our study, we even drew explicit connections between our participants' gameplay and the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) on literacy (Engerman, MacAllan, & Carr-Chellman, 2014). Now, as we report on the findings of our

project's third phase, we examine how COTS games provide socially relevant platforms for boys to encounter, think about, discuss, and evaluate literary concepts.

Methodology

Design and Analytical Framework

Informed by Squire's (2006) understanding of video games as "designed experiences," our own study set out to capture and analyze the lived experiences of male gamers by adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1997). To adequately and thoroughly give voice to those experiences, we relied on a three-interview process (Seidman, 1998). The first round of interviews sought a *focused life-history*. The second round of interviews targeted the *details of the game-playing experiences.* The third round of interviews—which were conducted as focus groups—gave participants the opportunity to collectively *reflect on the meaning* of their experiences. During this third phase—which we now report on—our design embraced reflexivity (Rossman & Rallis, 2011). In alignment with our hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 1997), we thus acknowledged ourselves as analytic tools—inseparable from the data collection and analysis process. Our research team consisted of students and faculty from the Pennsylvania State University's Learning, Design, and Technology program. This team utilized their professional education expertise under the guidance of an advisor with over 15 years of research experience. As the project developed, we added additional experts to the research team, including a high school English teacher with experience aligning Language Arts content to academic standards.

In an effort to extract meaningful themes from our interview data, the team utilized Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) as its analytical framework (Engeström, 1987, 2001). CHAT relies on the notion that individual development is inseparable from social engagement and cultural norms. CHAT thus identifies its subject as the entity conducting the activity (boy learner), the activity (video-game play), and the object as the motivating factors or products produced through the activity (Foot, 2014; Jonassen & Murphey, 1999). Our ongoing study has sought to uncover and describe that object. Games-based learning designers have often relied on CHAT as a lens to understand how learning occurs in designed spaces (DeVane & Squire, 2012), and we now employ it to help make sense of complex social, cultural, and historical factors embedded in modern video-game play.

Participants

Our participants included sixteen boys, ages 11-19, all of whom were athletes in a Northeastern PA school district. While this population represents a particular subset of boys, its focus helped us to highlight the important socio-cultural factors embedded in their video-game play while simultaneously maximizing the affordances of our CHAT framework. These boys all enjoyed and played the *same video games*. Perhaps more importantly, they actively competed and collaborated *with one another* during gameplay. These distinctions allowed us to better understand how the boys naturally and collectively thought about and discussed their favorite games. Since one of the authors was a coach in the school district, the research team had access to the boys during afterschool practices and workouts.

Data Analysis

The team relied on Thematic Analysis (TA) to help provide descriptive accounts of boys' experiences (Braun & Clark, 2006). More specifically, our analyses centered on the pedagogical nature of the participants' individual and collective game-playing experiences. To this end, our team developed a coding framework grounded in the principles of CHAT (Engeström, 1987, 2001). We then carefully reviewed the data to determine how the boys used various *rules and tools*, how they interacted with local and global gaming *communities*, and how their *histories* with both one another and the games impacted their learning experiences. In addition to applying researcher triangulation and member-checking methods, the research team embraced constant comparative-analysis as a means to ensure consistency between and among data sets (Hewitt-Taylor, 2001).

Findings and Discussion

During the initial phases of our study, we found and reported on the strong links between gameplay experiences and Language Arts and Literacy standards (Engerman, MacAllan & Carr-Chellman, 2014). Our participants repeatedly described being drawn to and motivated by the narrative and literary elements of COTS games like *Assassin's Creed*, *Skyrim*, and *God of War*. The desire to learn more about their favorite characters, locations, and storylines kept the boys engaged even when gameplay itself would become either stale or overly challenging. Similarly, our participants insisted that text-based reading comprehension was often a deciding factor in one's ability to progress through the game—and subsequently its narrative. The boys frequently reported having to learn new vocabulary words or to decipher text-based clues in order to find out how to overcome obstacles (Engerman, MacAllan & Carr-Chellman, 2014). These findings not only aligned with existing theoretical work on gaming and literacy-skills development (Steinkuehler, 2010), but they also served as a guiding framework for our study's third and final phase.

Ultimately, we discovered that narrative-driven video games provided a socially acceptable and culturally relevant platform for boys to think about, discuss, and evaluate literary moments. Throughout our focus group sessions, the boys eagerly shared their experiences with creating and role-playing archetypal characters in games like *Skyrim*; they described how these games both embraced and altered the conventions of classic literary and film genres; they were quick to critique and praise the ways in which game designers chose to present suspenseful and emotional scenes. We thus argue that—through their exploration of and participation in narrative-driven video games—adolescent boys actually practice *thinking like writers and critics*. Ostenson (2013) claims that his game-based English lessons challenged his students to see the unique strengths and weaknesses of the video game as a storytelling medium. Our participants not only exhibited a similar awareness, but they also actively described the various steps game designers and developers could take to make narrative-driven titles even more immersive, dramatic, and memorable. The boys thus proved themselves to be critical consumers, and, over the course of our interviews, the following connections between boy culture, video-game play, and the Language Arts disciplines naturally emerged.

Experiencing Characters

Modern, narrative-driven video games allow players to take control of and interact with diverse

characters, ranging from real-life historical figures to literary archetypes. On the surface, our participants were clearly motivated to play games featuring their favorite characters. For instance, many reported playing the entire *Assassin's Creed* franchise simply to learn more about its protagonist, Desmond Miles, and his hired-gun alter-egos, Altair and Ezio. More importantly, however, the boys demonstrated keen understandings of how these characters think, act, and relate to one another within and beyond the game space. In other words, through their game-playing experiences, our participants were able to compare, contrast, and analyze characters in compelling and often literary ways—they were able to unpack precisely what it meant *to be* a certain type of character. Specifically, when asked to describe how games present the stereotypical "warrior" character, the boys collectively responded:

> Ross: He's a *beast*—all around. He has all the chicks after him. He has the [biggest] sword. *Every* guy wants to be like him. He's just *that* guy.
>
> Terrance: He's very tall—very muscular… deep voice.
>
> Ben: He just goes in, guns blazing… no smarts. [*makes an exploding noise*]
>
> Chase: [He] kind of charges in headfirst, not thinking about what's behind the wall.

The boys continued to build off of one another, claiming that video game characters like *Call of Duty's* "juggernauts", *God of War's* Kratos, and *Borderlands'* "gunzerkers" all embodied the essential qualities of the warrior. Ross and Terrance added that, when given the choice, warriors were among their favorite characters to play as—even creating their own versions of the archetype in open-world games like *Fall Out* and *Skyrim*. Through their detailed descriptions—both physical and metaphysical—of the warrior, our participants demonstrated a deep understanding of how game designers choose to present and utilize archetypal characters. Not only could the boys imagine what a warrior might look like, but they could also make informed predictions about his personality, motivations, and flaws.

We argue that the very rules and mechanics of the games themselves foster players' abilities to make these connections and associations. Players are incentivized to role-play characters in particular ways based on a game's underlying design principles. For example, in *Assassin's Creed* (2007), players take the role of Altair, a quintessential hitman. From the game's opening sequences and cut-scenes, they *see* that Altair is agile, sneaky, confident, and resourceful. However, the medium's true educational power comes from its ability to reinforce these ideas through meaningful gameplay *experiences* or, as Squire (2006) argues, by "doing" and "being." Although players are welcome to try, they are unlikely to progress through the game by treating Altair like the aforementioned warrior. Instead, they must play to Altair's strengths by hiding in the shadows, stalking their targets from a distance, and fleeing at the first sign of trouble. Consequently, the game rewards players that are able to align their playstyles with the traits and qualities of its characters.

Seeking Thrills and Flexing Agency

While interesting and compelling characters certainly work to draw players into these digital worlds, our participants insisted that a game's ability to create, build, and maintain a suspenseful atmosphere was the single most important factor for staying engaged in its storyline. Similarly, the boys praised titles that were able to place their players in unique situations with multiple paths forward. Our participants thus shared an intense desire to at once be swept up by a game's dramatic twists and turns while

simultaneously feeling as if they had some control over how its events would ultimately unfold. The boys noted that *Skyrim* (2011), with its open-world and non-linear structure, was particularly adept at striking this balance. After all, this game carves out spaces for players to align with different in-game factions and to make a variety of moral decisions over the course of their adventure. Several participants even reported playing through the game multiple times to more completely experience its many storylines and expansive universe. Likewise, the boys showed genuine interest in learning about how their peers choose to navigate certain in-game moments—such as the decision to either spare or destroy the town of Megaton in *Fallout 3*.

These discussions often led our participants to compare and contrast suspenseful moments in video games to those found in books or movies. One such conversation centered on the survivor-horror game *Left 4 Dead* (2008) and its Hollywood counterparts:

Interviewer: Tell me a little more about what makes [*Left 4 Dead*] scary? Or, rather, what are the scariest moments when you're playing that game?

Trevor: When there's a whole zombie pack around you, and you're trying to bat 'em away.

Jack: Or when a zombie jumps out in front of your face.

Greg: And it gets dark… it gets *real* dark.

[…]

Jack: Or when you walk through a door—you don't know what's there.

Trevor: Yeah. You'll just be walking and a *hunter* will jump on you.

Jack: Or a *smoker.*

Interviewer: How is that experience different from watching a scary movie?

Greg: You can control it.

Trevor: Yeah. You're controlling [the characters] so…

Donavan: You can die or slice [the zombie's] head off. You can pick.

Jack: Basically, if you're watching the same movie five times, it'll get old and you won't get scared as much—

Trevor: Yeah. But if you've played a game, you can always be shocked.

In this exchange, the boys' repeated use of the word "you" underscores the intimate and immersive nature of modern games like *Left 4 Dead*. Moreover, its use suggests that players see themselves as the driving storytelling-agents, capable of influencing a game's action, pacing, and direction. In addition, the boys also demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of how the horror genre functions—of how it elicits fear in its players, spectators, and readers. According to our participants, horror games—both literally and figuratively—keep their players in the dark. Players never truly *know* what monsters lurk behind the next door until they find the courage to open it for themselves. As Trevor cautions, a vicious "hunter" *could* always be lying in wait.

Once again, we believe it is helpful to consider how a game's rules actively develops one's

understanding of these genre conventions. In the case of *Left 4 Dead*, the game relies on an artificial intelligence system called "The Director" to keep its players guessing. Instead of featuring scripted encounters at predetermined locations and times, The Director allows for the action and difficulty to flow and scale organically. Based on players' health totals, ammunition supplies, and skill-levels, The Director purposely places new and unique challenges in the game world for players to overcome. As Trevor claims, regardless of how many times one has played *Left 4 Dead*, "you can always be shocked." Therefore, by aligning its mechanics with its overarching themes, a video game can give its players the opportunity to *experience the essence* of particular genres.

Thinking like Writers and Critics

Although our participants reported becoming emotionally invested in many of these game-worlds, the boys nevertheless proved capable—even eager—to critique their favorite games and to theorize about how those titles might be improved. Across all three phases of our study, the boys universally wanted to associate a game's attention to detail with its quality. The more lifelike and believable a game's world and its characters felt, the better the product. Specifically, our participants hailed the *Assassin's Creed*, *Grand Theft Auto*, and *God of War* franchises as some of the best on the market. While the games' storylines certainly embrace conventions of science-fiction and fantasy, their environments and characters are nevertheless grounded in real-world history, geography, and mythology. For example, our participants were delighted to cross paths with the likes of George Washington, Leonardo da Vinci, and Captain Blackbeard in the *Assassin's Creed* games. As one boy explained, "the [game] world is built off of what it was [really like]. That's the *coolest* part—that's what makes it easier for the developers." In this response, Blake not only expresses how much he, personally, enjoys the real-world references and allusions, but he also demonstrates his ability to think like a writer. He recognizes that building worlds and stories from source material would be more efficient than creating them from imagination.

In a separate focus group, the boys walked interviewers through the process of designing their own dream video games. All of the participants stressed the importance of grounding their games in unique historic moments that have gone relatively ignored by mainstream video game developers. Walter, for instance, pitched a game that would explore the cultures and conflicts of the ancient Mesopotamian empires. Brad, on the other hand, described a hypothetical game set in feudal Japan:

> I've always liked samurai and ninjas and stuff like that. So my dream game would probably involve something on the ancient Asian continent—something with a lot of fighting and action and drama—like feudal Japan.
>
> […]
>
> I would probably try to pull as much from actual historical contexts as possible—from actual books… from, ahh… actual artifacts—pieces of actual history from that time period. And, I mean, there are games that *sort of* touch on that, like *Dynasty Warriors*… which is OK, but it's not what I want. Those are more like war games. I'm looking for a narrative-driven [one].

Walter and Brad were both quick to identify trends and gaps in the modern gaming industry. Brad, in particular, felt pressure to distinguish his dream game from similar titles. In other words, he clearly understood his rhetorical situation—to create a game in the tradition of *Dynasty Warriors* while simultaneously carving out his own niche as a developer. In addition, Brad's commitment to draw inspiration from "actual pieces of history" underscores his capacity to think like a writer. He

understands that designing a realistic video game is a complex and time-consuming task that requires serious research. Walter echoes this sentiment, recalling his reaction to seeing real-world architecture featured in the *Assassin's Creed* series:

It's pretty damn accurate. I knew what it was just from looking at it immediately. It was pretty incredible because I could see the creativity and the thought that went into it… and the time that went into it. It was—it was incredible.

Walter, like many of our participants, is awestruck by the games' realistic environment. However, perhaps more importantly, he expresses admiration for the designers and for their attention to detail. Thus, in both of these moments, Walter and Brad adopt the mantles of writers and critics. They consider the challenges associated with creating historical games that could meet—or even exceed—their lofty standards.

Conclusion

Our results suggest that boys are indeed experiencing meaningful literary moments through the COTS games that they naturally play and enjoy. Unfortunately, our classrooms continue to champion print literacies at the expense of digital ones. Furthermore, the grand narrative—that "video games are bad for you"—continues to cast its long shadow over students and teachers alike. Both parties struggle to see the literary and academic merits embedded in modern video-game play. Ironically, though, our participants—perhaps without even realizing it—repeatedly and effortlessly engaged in in-depth discussions about their favorite games' storylines, characters, and themes. Likewise, they proved deeply interested and invested in how developers chose to manipulate source material and to re-imagine classic genres in the effort to create immersive, digital worlds. Referencing literary terms and tropes throughout our focus-group interviews, the boys demonstrated the ability to think like writers and critics; they described and analyzed games much in the same way that English teachers want their students to discuss novels and poems. However, teachers need to do more than simply recognize and value their students' indigenous sources of literary knowledge. Rather, teachers must be willing to play COTS games for themselves and to devise meaningful, game-based lessons through which they might start to bridge students' experiences and interests with those of the English classroom.

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