Gaming Mindset:

Breaking the Stigma of Gaming, from “1v1 me on rust” to Textual Analysis

Sheila A. Urednick

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M.A. Committee

Rebecca Brittenham, Ph.D.
Director

Kyoko Takanashi, Ph.D.

7 May 2020

Jake Mattox, Ph.D.
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this project to my mom, Adaline Miller, who taught me to never quit and to love endlessly.
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Playing video games is often viewed as a mindless waste of time by many parents and educators unable to bypass the stigma attached to one of popular culture’s most common pastimes. Yet, expert gaming involves a complex skillset. As a gamer moves through a forty man raid in *World of Warcraft*, every player is expected to know their toon’s specialized role while communicating and working with other players to problem solve in order to defeat the end boss. Likewise, when playing *Overcooked*, team members must collaborate while attempting to prepare and serve hamburgers atop a moving semi or during an earthquake on the city streets. Video games help players build problem-solving skills, learn how to collaborate, and learn the context of unfamiliar vocabulary. Gaming is not a mindless activity. In *Good Video Games + Good Learning*, Professor James Paul Gee argues that “Good games achieve good learning because they do not set out, first and foremost, to teach. They set out to assess, and their approach to assessment leads to good teaching and learning” (78). Quality video games are designed to discover what skills a player lacks in order to challenge them to build their skills. Players receive frequent feedback and adjust to achieve better results. As an educator, I have begun to realize that the skills developed by a gamer are parallel to the skills used by a high school student to achieve success in the classroom. When an individual recognizes gaming as a viable form of literacy building, they develop a gaming mindset; an attitude that video game play produces problem-solving, collaborative, and literacy skills that are transferable from the virtual world to the classroom. By understanding the mindset of a gamer, teachers can utilize the gaming mindset to cultivate a culture in the classroom that
helps students tap into their problem-solving skills, acknowledge their ability to collaborate, and decode unfamiliar vocabulary. Thus a gaming mindset is a step toward breaking through a barrier to learning by casting aside the stigma associated with gaming.

My views on the mindset of a gamer are drastically different now compared to a few years ago when I first encountered Gee’s argument that good games are good for learning. His primarily positive points about video gameplay largely contradicted my observations of gamers. On a personal level, I had developed negative connotations associated with gaming. As a mother, gaming added a source of conflict between my children and me. My husband and I had to set parameters for our children’s video game playing to ensure that chores, homework, and family time did not fall to the wayside. I also have a cousin who struggled with a gaming addiction. As a teacher, I have dealt with a few students who have fallen asleep in my class because they stayed up late playing video games the previous night. Despite my negative interactions with gaming, Gee’s theory did intrigue me, and I felt that I needed to gain more insight before closing my mind off to his theory. In order to test Gee’s theory, I interviewed two gamers to discover what their mindset was and to see if they actually acquired the skills Gee wrote about. The interviews proved to be enlightening and changed my view on gaming.

The Mindset of a Gamer; a First-Hand Account of Gaming

Stereotypically, video gamers are tagged with the image of a young man living in his parents’ basement, not going to college, unable to hold down a full-time job, unproductive, and merely wasting time existing in a fictional world. While this judgment may hold true for some gamers, many video game enthusiasts are intelligent,
hardworking, and very aware of the amount of time they spend in front of a television set or computer screen. The careful division of family time versus game time is important to many gamers, and they strive to maintain a balance between interacting with loved ones and socializing with other gamers in a global community. Gamers interested in multiplayer games gather together in shared virtual spaces for a variety of reasons, from socializing with other gamers to simply enjoying the competitive process, and at times, to escape reality. No matter the draw to gaming, there is a specific set of skills one must learn in order to meet the objective of a game. I sought to discover the mindset and experiences of two different gamers, each at different points in their life. I wanted to discover what drove them to play, how their gameplay connected to their real-world life, and if any viable skills were gained through gameplay. Video game players must understand and navigate a world of language and literacy that is foreign compared to their everyday language use as well as comprehend unfamiliar customs. Ultimately, gamers accumulate a secondary discourse in order to navigate a space they choose to continually return to while deploying and simultaneously building problem-solving skills.

Teenagers are often the populations of gamers that receive a great deal of criticism for their gaming habits; therefore, I wanted one of my interviewees to come from the high school setting. My first subject is Isaac Nieto, a seventeen-year-old male. He is a junior in high school, has seven siblings, holds a job, and comes from a household that is conscientious of family time and places a priority on earning good grades in school. His favorite video games include Call of Duty, Modern Warfare 1 and 3, Minecraft, Red Dead Redemption II and Black Ops 2. Isaac’s first memory of gaming took him to his uncle’s home. It was there that he discovered his innate ability to pay
attention to details. Nieto’s uncle introduced him to *Call of Duty*, a first-person shooter game, at about the age of eleven. His uncle attempted to show off his skills to his nephew, certain that this newcomer to gaming would be impressed by his advanced level of play. However, it was the uncle that was outdone by the novice Nieto. Paying attention to specific written prompts embedded within the game, Nieto “simply read the subtitles,” and quickly outplayed his uncle. This sparked a desire in him to continue on in this new world of gaming, ignited by an overexcited relative. Nieto’s parents were not in favor of his gaming. When he was in seventh and eighth grade, Nieto immersed himself in playing video games and his grades plummeted. He played video games right after school until one o’clock in the morning. Gaming restrictions were quickly implemented by his concerned parents. Looking back, Nieto states that “it was a good thing my parents limited my game time. They were right; I was playing video games far too much.” Nieto is now able to self-regulate his game playing time. He currently plays video games for three to four hours a night, “after spending time with family.” For him, personal relationships take priority over his gaming, even though he desires to become a professional player.

After interviewing Nieto, I chose a slighter older male subject, twenty-year-old Gabe White, to assess what aspects of gaming would be parallel between the two individuals and what points would differ. White grew up with his mother, step-father, a brother, and two half-siblings. His family played board games when he was young, especially Monopoly. The first video game the family purchased was the *Lego Star Wars* game for the PS2. As White recalls, “It was childish, but I liked it so I soon took over the game.” During his fourth-grade year in elementary school, White encountered many new
experiences with gaming. At his cousin’s house, he was introduced to *Star Wars Battlefront II*, which his grandfather later bought for him. It was during this time that White’s best friend taught him how to play *Halo* and *Borderlands*. Soon, he had the Xbox 360 system and by seventh grade was playing with other gamers online. While in junior high, White’s game playing spiraled into eight hours a day after he arrived home from school, which he comments “was ridiculous.” It is interesting to note that White and Nieto spent an excessive amount of time devoted to gaming during junior high school. For White, this pattern of excessive playing continued through high school as a coping mechanism to deal with difficult issues at school and at home. White reflected that game playing was a “relief from stress and people,” but that he also was not doing well mentally during that period of his life. Now he works full time and plays a few hours every night. Currently, he enjoys playing the *Borderlands* series and *Fallout: New Vegas*. His favorite game is *Red Dead Redemption II* because it allows the player to move away from the original storyline and use his agency of choice to create his own story.

Playing video games for the first time requires the individual player to take risks and dive headfirst into unfamiliar waters of gaming literacy through the use of problem-solving skills. Rarely is formal education or coaching a part of the learning process. Nieto and White shared with me their sink-or-swim experiences when encountering new video games. Both gamers went through the process of learning from their mistakes, which forced them to utilize problem-solving skills in order to “survive” a game. Seasoned gamers did not tell the new game players all the tricks they needed to know, nor did they explain the language and customs of the game. Instead, Nieto and White had to go through the process of discovering how to play a game with prompts from other players,
which usually took the form of insults being screamed at them from frustrated gamers. They also had to figure out how to get past obstacles and learn for themselves how to advance in the game. Brazilian educator and revolutionary Paulo Freire places this form of learning-by-doing in stark contrast to a traditional “banking concept of education” where “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (257). According to Freire, true learning cannot occur when one individual deposits their knowledge into another person’s mind, eliminating the need for problem-solving skills. Contrary to banking, Freire claims that problem-posing takes place “only in communication” and “involves a constant unveiling of reality” (260, 263). In the case of video game playing, seasoned players communicate with novice players, not by giving them knowledge but by insisting they acquire it through trial and error, while dealing with the consequences of angry players, and frequently the death of their own character. Trial and error are a part of the learning process in which “failures,” like the death of one’s avatar, are a normalized aspect of the learning curve. Nieto states that when learning how to play a video game you need to “pay attention to the environment and the small details within the game,” because if you don’t, other players get very angry very quickly. White also remarked that he “had no idea of what to do” when first playing Call of Duty, but quickly learned after engaging his problem-solving skills. James Paul Gee’s argument for the positive learning process incurred by gamers concurs with Freire’s theory of problem-posing, proclaiming that “Games are built around problem-solving, and on the choices and actions players take to solve problems” (Good Video Games 76). Video games are structured to require the player to use problem solving strategies at all levels of play, especially while still a
beginner, when all aspects of a game are foreign. At first, a player problem-solves to survive, while a seasoned gamer uses problem-solving skills to attain goals within the game.

Amid learning the logistics of a video game, the player must also understand the requisite language and dialogue. When asked about the learning curve in gaming and the language required to participate, Nieto divulged an array of terms and acronyms that are necessary to successful game playing. I asked him to recall when he was new to the game and the consequences of not understanding the culture and language. While playing *Rainbow 6*, Nieto did not know what the term “objective” meant. He was running with another player in the first-person shooter game and was told to go to the objective. Confusion set in followed by the inability to move. The other player started screaming at him to go to the objective, over and over. Nieto’s character died, and he quickly learned that the “objective” he was ordered to go to was a space inside a nearby building. *Call of Duty* also has a language unique to its game, as White quickly learned, including reference to “mudline,” “loadout,” and “quick scoping.” One phrase that White found particularly confusing at first was “1v1 me on rust,” which referred to a method used to settle a disagreement in gaming during *Call of Duty*. The conflicted players went to a specific place in the game, performed a ceremonial dance, and then shot at each other with sniper rifles until one died. Playing video games with other people online forced Nieto and White to learn the foreign language of the gaming arena; thus they both acquired a new literacy as a secondary discourse. Gee’s focus on literacy extends beyond reading and writing as he explains that one must “think of a discourse as an ‘identity kit’ which comes complete with the appropriate costume and instructions on how to act and
talk so as to take on a particular role that others will recognize” (“Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics” 537). In the multiplayer gaming community, players choose a character and use specialized language specific to the game in which they participate. The gamers I interviewed had very similar experiences while acclimating to various gaming literacies and obtaining a secondary discourse, foreign from their first language. Nieto mentioned that he experienced a good deal of confusion while navigating both the customs and languages in several games. He goes on to state that each game is “like a foreign world or culture. Some are bad, and some are amazing. But those that live there know where to go and not to go. You learn the culture and know-how to handle it” (Nieto). Nieto’s explanation of the environment he deals with in Call of Duty, Modern Warfare, and Rainbow 6 reflects Gee’s discourse theory, encompassing an understanding of culture, language, and behavior to the point that a secondary discourse intermingles with the primary discourse (“Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics” 528). The secondary discourse that was awkward at first for Nieto and White is now used fluidly; they use the secondary language of their various gaming worlds with ease, while participating in their primary discourse. Both subjects easily changed between their multiple discourses during the course of their interviews.

Once Nieto and White were able to communicate within the borders of their various video games, they were able to build on their basic problem-solving skills. Real-time strategy games, Age of Empires, Call of Duty, Borderlands, Red Dead Redemption II, are games named by White that require the use of problem-solving skills. He points out how these games present situations that challenge the player with risk and reward scenarios. The gamer’s character must risk his safety in Rainbow 6 Siege while working
in two teams of five to rescue team members, capture the enemy, or defuse bombs. Video
games are more than complacent forms of entertainment, Gee claims that “Games are
based not on content, but on problems to solve” (Good Video Games 61). As Nieto and
White work through the problems presented to their character within the aforementioned
games, each player must assess a given situation and make decisions that lead to the
resolution of a problem. For example, in Fallout: New Vegas, White points out that the
post-apocalyptic role-playing game requires the gamer to figure out what caused the
destruction of different areas. Problem-solving in this scenario requires keen visual
observation and inferencing skills to solve the mystery.

Although Gee’s theories on secondary discourse acquisition and the problem-
solving skills formed through gaming are the positive aspects of gaming, he largely
ignores the negative effects of excessive gaming. As evidenced by the interviews of Nieto
and White, gaming has positive learning results on gamers by building a secondary
discourse and problem-solving skills; however, there are ill effects of gaming,
particularly for preteens and young teenagers. Nieto and White experienced an addiction
to video games during their junior high school years, around the ages of twelve to
fourteen. Both young men dealt with low grades in school due to their obsessive
gameplay. Although Nieto and White chose to play video games for different reasons,
Nieto for enjoyment and the social aspect while White needed an escape from reality,
they experienced the same outcome of bad grades and angry parents. Gee accentuates the
positive outcomes of gaming and the link to education but does not acknowledge the
issues faced by individuals that succumb to playing games in great excess, to the point
where real-world consequences are imminent. I wonder how Gee would respond to the
distraction video games pose to students in my classroom. As a field study, I feel it is worth noting that on occasional moments I discover a student playing video games on the school provided laptop when they are supposed to be working and are behind on their school work. Rather than tackle the task or project before them, their mind turns to video games to escape the real world of their education; therefore I am curious how Gee would address this type of video gaming in education. He may present ideas that connect learning with gaming, as he proposes in Good Video Games + Good Learning; however, I continue to question the distracting pull of games.

Despite the distractibility, the world of gaming requires players to learn and understand a unique language and dialogue as well as call upon previously learned skills which are transferable to the school setting. Experienced gamers possess a set of specialized capabilities in order to be competitive while employing problem-solving strategies, as evidenced through the experiences shared by Nieto and White. Their gaming experiences reveal a problem within the educational community; it largely ignores the connection between virtual play and skills for learning. Both gamers engage in literacy building skills as they learn to read a game, understanding the context of the unfolding action much like a plot line in a story. Collaboration and problem-solving are important factors in being able to flush out a complex storyline for video game players. Working with other players to develop strategies in Call of Duty is vital in securing the ability to progress in the game, as pointed out by Nieto and White. Likewise, high school students benefit greatly by collaborating to discuss what they read in a book and apply those conversations to a plot diagram. When my freshmen students read Of Mice and Men, they hold discussions within groups before building a plot diagram. The same is
true for my juniors and seniors reading Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. We have group conversations and work together to create a plot diagram to build a clear understanding of the plot, enabling them to further analyze the text. They collaborate through dialogue then problem-solve as a story arc is filled out. Individuals learn best when they share experiences (*Literacy and Education*, Gee 130). Collaboration involves problem-solving as individuals work together toward a common goal, whether succeeding in a raid or filling out a plot diagram, these skills are transferable between the virtual world and the educational realm.

Parallels also exist between how a gamer's language acquisition takes place and the development of a student's understanding of words in context. Both gamers and students stumble across words and phrases they struggle to make meaning of, whether in a game or a book, which contribute to a lack of comprehension. Through trial and error, the gamers learn to understand the context of the new language they encounter, as White did while playing *Call of Duty*. Nieto learned what terms meant in *Rainbow 6*, as he dealt with confusion and ultimately failure at first. Both gamers struggle through the learning process just as my students must learn words they encounter for the first time in the literature they read. To understand meaning, whether virtual or real, Gee explains that "experiences in the world are the foundation for situated meanings for language, I am pointing to the importance of images, actions, goals, and dialogue. I am, in a sense, repeating what Paulo Freire said long ago when he argued for the priority and importance of 'reading the world' to 'reading the word'" (*Good Video Games + Good Learning* 65, 66). Understanding experiences that one encounters in the real world enables an individual to make meaning of words they encounter by association. Likewise, video
games provide the gamer an interactive space with dialogue between players as a way to facilitate learning new terms through an experience. Similarly, teachers provide students with visual aids and interactions between students coupled with class discussion to assist in the comprehension of unfamiliar language. Validating game play as a literacy skill builder is one step educators can take towards developing a gaming mindset and coming closer to breaking the stigma gamers face while occupying the role of a student.

In order to emulate the literacy that takes place in the virtual world, some teachers apply game-based learning using video game play to teach students. One typical method involves pairing older students with younger ones to mentor them through the reading components of a game. Megan Glover Adams, a language arts teacher, finds game-based learning to be successful when video game play is “combined with cross-age tutoring” (56). Adam’s use of Neverwinter Nights involves an older student tutoring a younger student, helping them with the reading portions and advancement of the video game play. She feels this form of teaching is helpful for students due to the mentoring that occurs. Mentoring is an important strategy that is effective in helping students to form levels of deeper understanding about a text. However, game-based learning has its limitations. While it may be conducive to a small school, it is an unrealistic method of pedagogy in the public school setting with large student populations, lack of funding, and overcrowded classrooms. Required coursework gives no room for cross-age tutoring during class time. But educators can use a gaming mindset in place of game-based learning to make connections between students and their curriculum when they understand the way video game play builds knowledge in players, as seen in the case of Nieto and White.
Video gameplay, however, is not a standard part of most curriculums largely because educators are encouraged, and at times pushed, to teach according to trends in education. Over the past twenty-five years, the mindset has been to teach to the standardized test. More recent trends are turning toward College and Career Readiness training. Trends in education drive the content of the curriculum and the method of delivery. When teachers “teach to the test,” the focus is on imitating what has become known in my school as “game day,” or the day of testing. Ironically, “game day” is a stressful, sterile, regimented day of standardized testing, lacking any element of play. Administrators intend “game day” to signify an important event that requires precise practice for a positive outcome by juxtaposing two events, a day of enjoyable competition and a day of dreaded testing. The platform for learning occurs within the parameters that mimic the graduation qualifying exam, leaving little room for enjoyment. Students are given short passages of text for close reading and annotation, precise writing prompts to respond to, and reading comprehension exercises that resemble “game day” tests. There is little room for innovative ideas such as game-based learning, which makes a change of mindset more applicable and realistic than a change of materials. In many situations, it is more feasible to adopt a gaming mindset than it is to integrate video gameplay into the curriculum.

Gaming Mindset as a Tool for Altering Mental Attitude

Mental attitude is an important element in determining a person’s success or failure, and when a student believes that they lack the ability to accomplish a task, their teacher needs to help them realize what they are capable of doing. There are students who
believe they are incapable of doing well in their class due to earlier failures. More than likely these are also students who have played video games but did not give up because of early defeats. Instead, they likely worked until they understood what they were doing well enough to become good at playing the game. As White pointed out, he had to figure out through trial and error how to survive when first playing *Call of Duty*. He experienced defeat many times while learning the best ways to proceed in the game. The frame of mind used by White, to persevere by learning from multiple “failures,” is the same mindset it takes to get through a reading assignment encountered by a student for the first time. I recently had a freshman student who was giving up on understanding the attitude of the British towards the Burmese people in George Orwell’s “The Hanging.” This young man was used to doing poorly in English Language Arts classes to the point where he decided that trying was pointless. Psychologist Carol Dweck refers to individuals who believe their ability is set and not capable of changing as having a “fixed mindset” (10). Due to prior negative experiences, my student would not even try to make sense of the text. Rather than letting him accept defeat, I worked with him on strategies to break down each paragraph to extract meaning. When he said to me, “I just don’t get it,” I asked him if he played video games. He responded with “yeah,” so I told him to pretend that the text was a video game and to use those same problem-solving skills that he uses when gaming to make sense of the story. The student got a bit excited, or perhaps relieved that I was speaking a language he understood and could connect with. He told me, “Okay, you bet!” For that moment he shifted out of a fixed mindset. I do not believe he reached a growth mindset with just one shift in his attitude, but he was certainly taking on the challenge with a different point of view, which set him on the path to a growth
mindset. Dweck describes the growth mindset as “believing people can develop their abilities” (215). Once a student can associate skills in the virtual affinity space with those in the real world learning space, they may realize that they have abilities that can be honed. My student took on a challenge by shifting into gaming mode, accessing his problem-solving skills. The prompting I gave him is similar to a strategy suggested by social scientist Joseph Grenny. In his book, *Influencer*, Grenny highlights tactics used by individuals that have proven results in influencing other people. Instead of giving a person a mound of strategies, Grenny suggests that influencers “carefully invest in strategies that help increase ability. In so doing, they avoid trying to resolve ability problems by simply piling on one more motivational technique” (114). Redirection of mindset can facilitate transference of motivation to a belief in ability (Green 113). This is the basis for gaming mindset. For my student, the beginnings of a growth mindset is initiated by a gaming mindset when the focus is narrowed to only highlight the idea that existing video game skills are transferable to academics. While not every student may not respond as my student did in the case with “The Hanging” and my suggestion to apply his gaming skills, this is at least a step towards helping students relate on a personal level to their school assignments.

Gaming mindset can help students make connections between what they do in school and the interests they have outside of the classroom, turning a frustrated, hopeless teen into a more attentive pupil as they realize that the subset of skills they possess are parallel. Most video game players are relentless. They possess a state of mind that does not back down from a challenge. A newbie playing *Call of Duty* does not know what to do when given commands that are foreign to their understanding, yet they continue
playing the game. Nieto and White both experienced “sink or swim” situations where
they were forced to either figure out how to continue through the game or fail. Both kept
going back to play the game and continued to learn more despite multiple failures. I
observe this same grit in my sons and husband when they play *World of Warcraft*
together. When a player new to *World of Warcraft* is instructed to “kite the mobs around
the room” and does not know how to carry out the order, they risk failing the group
objective. They fail. Everybody dies. Yet the gamer continues to go back to the game to
learn from their mistakes. Their ability to overcome challenges by seeking new strategies
is characteristic of a growth mindset. This is likened to Dweck’s statement that “The
passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even (or especially) when it’s not going
well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset” (7). People who do not give up due to
difficult circumstances understand that their abilities can grow with hard work. This
frame of mind is established in students who are also gamers. But there is a broken link
for gamers who exhibit a growth mindset when playing video games but fall into a fixed
mindset when doing school work that is challenging, believing that, in the educational
context, one failure will result in the next defeat.

One way teachers can help students shift their mindset is by understanding that
there is a parallel between playing video games and the traditional reading of books and
writing to make meaning of those texts. While the virtual world of gaming exists in a
different affinity space (a place where shared learning occurs) than a real world
classroom with desks and chairs, there are connections between popular culture’s
entertaining venue of skill building through video games and the building of literacy that
takes place in schools. Richard Berger and Julian McDougall, authors of the research-
based article “Reading Videogames as (Authorless) Literature,” focus on gaming studies, new literacy research, and the “socio-cultural framing of education” (142). Berger and McDougal merge multiple studies to form a foundation for a cross-disciplinary view on gaming and literacy. Their research is focused on students’ and teachers’ assumptions and understanding of literature and the “authorless” text within a “curriculum discourse” (Berger and McDougal 145). The video game *L.A. Noire*, set as a detective novel, is used as the anchor ‘text.’ As teachers and students in secondary and post-secondary education make their way through the game by working together to analyze aspects of the ‘text,’ they are interviewed and write blog posts about their views on the experience of reading a video game like they would a book. Teachers who are new to gaming initially express some apprehension about the literary value of playing video games. The findings of Berger and McDougal’s research indicate the need for educators to acknowledge gaming as an act of reading, validating video games as a type of literature. Jim Collins, a professor of Film and English at the University of Notre Dame, explores the “reframing of literature” regarding the shift in the form of the written word, whether on a page, an e-read, or as a film adaptation. As he proposes, “If literacy ultimately depends on a set of assumptions about what is worth knowing, what does popular literacy culture promise to deliver, since it provides not just the books for everybody, but the reasons for having a literary experience for everybody, in whatever format it may be encountered?” (Collins 18). While Collins is not speaking directly about the value of reading found in video games, he is making the point that literacy comes in more forms than just books. He also brings up the issue that literacy can be presented in different formats. The rapid advancement of technology over that past several decades is the catalyst for Collins’
comments as he addresses the changing formats of literature. Like Collins, Gee explains literacy as something beyond words bound in a book. Gee’s theory of gaming literacy recognizes that quality video games provide positive learning opportunities for players that mirror the learning that takes place through reading and writing. He describes how the playing of video games engages the same skills that are needed when reading and writing. Gee points out that “digital media and books share important properties; they are both forms of literacy in the sense that they are forms of taking meaning (“reading”) and making meaning (“writing”)” (Good Video Games + Good Learning 61). As video game players, students are engaged in the same property of learning while playing good video games as they are when reading and writing. Much like Nieto’s reference to his gaming experiences when he discovered that it is important to pay attention to the small details, so too must a student close read a text. If both students and educators are able to embrace the idea that literacy comes in multiple formats with a change of mindset, the dichotomy debate between authorless texts and literature in the form of books can be subdued.

Over the last forty years, the shift from reading books for entertainment to playing video games is massive, changing the acquisition of literacy for teenagers, causing tension between student gamers and teachers. An extensive study by the American Psychological Association reveals that during the 1970s, 60% of teens read a book or newspaper daily, versus 26% in 2010, and yet that number drops again to 16% in 2016 (Twenge). As the teenage population has decreased in their daily practices of reading a book over several decades, their time spent in playing video games has increased. Video gameplay is a part of popular culture that a majority of teenagers embrace. An article in the Washington Post investigates current trends in video gameplay. The statistics in the
article report that 56% of females and 89% of males between the ages of fourteen and twenty-one engage in video gameplay (Guskin). What is interesting about these trends is that during the 1970s, the act of reading books for pleasure aligned with a major activity found in the English Language Arts classroom. Book studies have long been the standard in English classes. That standard has not changed. In addition to books assigned to the whole class, students are often given a choice of books to read and analyze individually. The activities students participate in outside of school have an impact on how they connect to what is taught by their teachers. If a student is immersed in reading while at home, reading a book for class is familiar territory. John Potter, an education consultant, looks at the boundary between schools and home “not [as] a solid barrier as such but a semi-permeable membrane through which things of value travel along with the learners” (7). The activities and forms of entertainment that teenagers participate in while away from school build skills that accompany students when they engage in classroom learning. If educators are caught up in the trend of the 1970s where reading is an expected activity for students to willingly participate outside of class, they are choosing a fixed-mindset. To break into a growth mindset, which serves as best practice in pedagogy, teachers need to be open to the idea that students have not stopped reading altogether; they are merely approaching reading from a different platform.

Recently, the students in my classroom got into a discussion about their reading habits that gave me insight into when the shift in their reading habits occurred. I was introducing a new book as a class study. Many of my freshmen murmured about having to read a book. This spawned an interesting class discussion. The majority of my students agreed that they do not read books presently like they did when they were in elementary
school. In kindergarten through sixth grade, an accelerated reading program is in place
where students earn pizza and other rewards for the number of books they read. Without
incentives, students’ reading of books decreases. One young woman said that while she
read many books when she was young, she now orders books from Amazon according to
their color because she uses them as decoration, not for reading. According to the
fourteen to eighteen-year-olds in my classes, the shift in their reading habits occurred at
the junior high school level. There is no incentive program for our school’s seventh and
eighth graders, so the students had little motivation to continue reading books. As high
schoolers, they read social media posts, memes, articles that interest them on the internet,
and for video game purposes. Few students realize these forms count as ‘reading.’
Likewise, educators frequently fail to recognize the skills set held by today’s youth due to
their gaming and digital media interaction. This is a point of tension. I hear many English
teachers claim that students lack the skills to be able to analyze a text or fulfill writing
assignments. While they may come up short on the mechanical skills of analysis or
writing an argumentative essay, those that participate in playing video games do have a
core foundation of necessary skills. Perhaps the problem lies within the value given to the
manner in which students acquire skills and not the lack of ability. Restructuring
instruction and adjusting to a gaming mindset may help bridge gaming skills with
analytical and essay writing skills.

Connecting the Science Behind Playing to the School Environment

Another facet of the gaming mindset focuses on the importance of creating an
environment that provides an element of play for students while they are engaging in the
learning process. Part of what makes gaming so compelling is its element of fun and competition. Gee states, "When we think of games, we think of fun. When we think of learning we think of work. Games show us this is wrong. They trigger deep learning that is itself part and parcel of the fun" (Good Video Games + Good Learning 36). For many students, learning feels burdensome in part because the process of acquiring knowledge lacks an element of pleasure. On the other hand, games by the very nature of the name, conjure up the idea that the activity is going to be enjoyable. When learning is experienced through an enjoyable activity, the process of learning merges with play. Integrating small moments of play into standard curriculum lowers student’s stress levels and assists in problem-solving capabilities. How the brain responds to games and pleasure is an area of research scientists continue to explore. They find that dopamine is released into the body when an individual is engaged in play (Wang). The hormone dopamine lowers stress levels which increases focus and aids in the learning process (Wang). One reason Nieto and White give for wanting to play video games is the stress relief they experience as they become immersed in a virtual world. When gamers experience failure or a setback in a game, or encounter stressful situations, they continue to play despite the defeat because the processes of learning in gaming involve pleasure. But when students are stressed while writing a paper, reading a text, or learning a new concept, the hormone cortisol is released, which inhibits focus (CITE). Their learning exercises rarely involve games or play, therefore dopamine is not released. I can see this in my students. Most start off doing well and are engaged in reading a new text, but when they become stressed because they struggle to understand what they are reading, they start mind drifting. They may start to stare off into space, put their head on the desk with
the book one inch from their face, pretending to read, or ask to use the bathroom as an avoidance tactic. Conversely, if a teacher provides opportunities for students to play games while learning lesson material, they are providing an opportunity for the student to maintain a greater focus for learning during the playing time and immediately following the game. Ultimately, the type of game played is irrelevant. Games that are enjoyable for players result in the release of dopamine. For the educator, having a gaming mindset includes creating an environment that allows for moments of play attached to the lesson plan.

When I provide my students with opportunities to play games, they are invested in the learning process, help each other, and are excited about their team’s progress. Two of the games I have my students play to learn their vocabulary words are Quizlet Live and Pear Deck’s Flashcard Factory. In both games, the students are electronically sorted into teams. Quizlet Live projects a leaderboard on my BenQ in the front of the room while each team is racing to see who can get the most vocabulary words correct. Each team is given either one term or definition that shows up on each team member’s computer screen. Then, each member has three different choices on their screen which could be the answer, but only one team member actually has the correct answer. When the student with the correct answer clicks on the correct term or definition, their team scores a point. The first team to reach ten points wins. My students become very loud, at times yelling the correct answer to their teammates during this game while they work together to win the race. Pear Deck’s Flashcard Factory works in much the same way as Quizlet Live, only students are put into two overall groups, the day shift and the night shift, then further separated into pairs. One partner must write an example of the term while the other
partner must draw a picture of the definition. After at least one of each term is completed collectively, the teacher stops the teams by pressing a quality control button. He or she then decides to accept or deny each entry. The team with the most accepted flashcards wins. I find that these and other games are effective in raising my students’ level of performance in tasks following the games. Their energy levels are higher and their focus is greater after playing the game than prior to the competition. Not only are they well prepared for their vocabulary test, but they are also more attentive to the following lesson.

Follow-up interview: A Reflective Continuation and the Possibilities of Gaming Mindset

After developing the idea of a gaming mindset, I went back to Nieto and White for a follow-up interview eighteen months after our initial conversations. I wanted to discover if there were any changes to their gaming habits and to find out what types of games they were drawn to as they grew older as well as what specific qualities of the games create high interest. Their social habits were also a point of interest, since there is a strong stigma attached to gamers as people who exist for hours in a dark room, losing themselves in a fictional, virtual world. Furthermore, I wondered if Nieto and White could make connections between the skills they developed in gaming and their real world experiences in work and school. In addition, I was curious to discover what their thoughts are on the gaming mindset and how they believe it would have affected their learning processes in high school.

Although I was unable to interview Nieto for a second time, White granted me a follow-up interview that resulted in additional insights. Twenty-one year old White
admits that his gaming habits have not changed since the first interview. White still plays video games four to five hours a day during the week and more on the weekends, depending on whether or not he has plans with his family. The video games he enjoys playing the most are *Borderlands III, Rainbow 6 Siege, Doom Eternal, Destiny II*, and *The Division II*. As soon as he said *Borderlands* I realized that this was one of his favorite games the last time we interviewed. White started playing *Borderlands* before he was in high school. I asked him to share with me what continuously drew him to this game in particular. He told me that *Borderlands* is not a traditional RGP storyboard. It is presented in a comic book style with the narrator depicted as an old man telling a story to a young boy. The gamer actually interacts with the story by playing out the plot line. There are four premade characters in the storyline and the player learns more about each character and they proceed through the story. White also explained that “The tone is different in *Borderlands* than in [for example] *Elder Scrolls*. In *Elder Scrolls* the tone is more serious, whereas *Borderlands* it is far less serious. Crazy things happen, like an H.P. Lovecraft style wedding.” The design of this game presents the gamer with moments and events that mimics bizarre twists of weird fiction. White’s experience in playing *Borderlands* is an example of Gee’s idea of “Meaning as Action Image” in that “Humans do not usually think through general definitions and logical principles. Rather, they think through experiences they have had and imaginative reconstructions of experience” (*Good Video Games + Good Learning* 35). Gee explains how experiences give words meaning. For example, he references the experience of a “wedding” as an event that must be experienced by the participants in order to fully understand the concept of the word (*Good Video Games + Good Learning* 35). In the case of the wedding in *Borderlands*,
White expected the type of ceremony that is typical in the real world with a formally
dressed groom and bride, a minister, and guests assembled in a sacred setting. Instead, the
weird nature of the virtual wedding takes place on a sidewalk with unusually dressed
guests and unconventional events, creating a setting that alters his idea of a “wedding”
and consequently reminds him of an author’s unique literary style.

Furthermore, playing *Borderlands* provides White with an experience that is
likened to participating in a three dimensional form of a book. This video game also
offers the player first-hand experience as characters in the storylines. Although the player
does not create the story as they progress in the game, it is the experience of participating
in the already written plot and the gradual unveiling of character traits that keeps White’s
interest. Instead of reading words on a page and interacting with characters purely
through the mind, he is able to take part in the story on a physical level, using his hands
to manipulate his adventure through the use of the game controller.

Another point that I touched on with White were his reasons for continuing
gaming and whether they have changed since our last interview. White named stress
relief and socialization as primary reasons for choosing gaming as a form of
entertainment. He pointed out that video games allow the player to do things to relieve
stress that typically cannot be done in the real world. Aside from shooting things, he
enjoys the stress relief he feels as gaming offers him the opportunity to socialize. I asked
him how the socializing aspect of gaming is different for him now compared to when he
was in high school. White shared with me that it is vastly different. In high school, the
friends he attended class with would plan out what games they would play together
virtually after school when everyone went home. Then the next day, when they were back
together, they discussed the previous nights’ gaming. Now, he meets and makes friends online while gaming. He compares video gaming socialization to the bar scene. Many times people go to the bars to meet other people or to hang out. It is not uncommon for people to make new friends while going out to drink socially. White told me that he, like many gamers, does not drink. He said it would be really hard to play an intense game without his full senses. Instead, he goes online and plays games in a virtual world where he is able to interact with other people that share his same interests. I asked if he ever talked to his online gaming friends outside of the virtual world. He stated that they often text each other, participate in group chats, and snapchats. They share their interests outside of gaming, how relationships are going, and have even mailed each other items like external hard drives. He feels a bond with the friends he has made through virtual gameplay since graduating from high school. White experiences the transference of socialization and collaboration from a virtual reality to the real world.

Beyond the stress relief and socialization, I wondered if White was able to transfer the skills he used in gaming to benefit him in the workplace. After careful consideration, he references the skills set he uses when he plays *Doom Eternal*. When playing this game, White has to learn how to use his pool of resources to advance in the game. The resources change frequently as the player progresses, therefore the gamer must learn to keep track of what they have and understand what they need. This puts the player in a “figure it out as you go” mode. White remarks how the skill of evaluating resources and being able to think when things change course helps him in the working world.

I also spoke to White about the idea of a gaming mindset and asked him what types of strategies, if any, could have helped him connect his gaming to what he learned
in class. White expressed that his engagement in his learning experience in high school would have been greater if teachers had used language that reflected what gamers encountered in video games. One example he gives is math based. If his math teacher had used math word problems that were written using language that included gaming terms, his interest in school work would have greatly increased. This method could have connected his interests outside of school to the work he was required to do to pass a math class. He also felt that if a teacher had helped him realize that the skills he developed while gaming, like problem-solving strategies, collaborative skills, and language acquisition, were applicable to reading and writing, he quite possibly would have earned higher grades.

Finally, I asked White what teachers can do to help students that are gamers. He told me they need to abandon the stigma that is attached to gaming. He said that stereotyping by teachers in school is detrimental to a student’s education. White had many situations where a teacher knew he was a gamer and made negative comments about him and the past time he loved. This created a wedge between him and those negative teachers. He did not connect with them nor did he want to work hard in their class because he knew he was being stereotyped. It shut him down. Accepting gamers as students with valuable literacy skills is imperative. Too many times gaming literacy and literacy in the English Language Arts class are divided:

All too often the two are seen as separate types of literacy and are dichotomized and put in binary opposition by teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and researchers. However, these two “places” have many overlapping areas
students often attempt to bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, when they do they are often silenced and their literacies are not seen as valid (Gerber and Price 61). Even though gaming is not new, the literacy of gaming continues to be overshadowed by a stigma that many gamers feel still exists. Multiple online articles explore this continuing problem and how it affects gamers and the gaming community. Blog posts are written by gamers who express exasperation at not being viewed as intelligent, despite the fact that they may have a college degree or certification in their trade. Some gamers are afraid that if their colleagues at work discover their gaming past time, they will be seen as lazy. Teens often shy away from sharing with teachers their favorite video games for fear of being viewed as someone that blows their time on a mindless activity. I try to find out what my student’s interests are outside of school. When I ask if they enjoy video games, some are hesitant to share that they are gamers or what games they enjoy playing. On occasion, when a student tells me they do not really play video games, a classmate calls them out and announces that they just played with them online the previous night. The last time this conversation took place in my classroom, I shared with my students that I am writing a paper based on video game play. Almost immediately, their demeanor shifted from embarrassment to engagement as they started asking me questions and became interested in the topic involving video gameplay.

Educators must realize the validity of gaming literacy and embrace the gaming mindset to begin breaking the stigma of gaming. White’s second interview revealed more about the social stigma of gaming than our initial conversation. The first interviews provided a first-hand account of gaming and the frame of mind a video game player constructs while taking part in virtual adventures. This formed the foundation for the
concept of a gaming mindset by acknowledging that the mind is very active building specific, valuable skills during the playing of video games. Research backs up the idea of gaming mindset, validating the learning and skills acquired. The transference of gaming skills from the virtual world to the school setting are evident as seen in Gee’s game-based learning approach along with Feire’s theory of problem-posing. Furthermore, Dweck’s growth mindset points out the importance of a person’s frame of mind and the effect it has on a student’s success; hence, showing how gaming mindset is a stepping stone to creating change in teachers and students’ approach to what constitutes valid platforms for learning.

It has become evident to me that somehow, many educators have fallen into a fixed mindset about the reading habits of teenagers in the twenty-first century. When teachers disregard the electronic and virtual platforms of literacy that teens are engaged in, they are discrediting and dismissing their students’ subset of skills. As a result, they are compartmentalizing their students into predetermined stereotypes. When students feel judged and categorized, their desire to work succumbs to predetermined attitudes. If educators adopt a gaming mindset, they validate the format of their students' acquisition of literacy via gaming, thus setting aside gaming stigma. In the ever changing world that we live in, it is necessary to embrace the fluidity of literacy platforms. While we as educators cannot control the tides in education nor the unexpected tempests, like the COVID-19 pandemic that alters pedagogical practices, we can shift our mindset, choosing to build up in our students their ability and confidence to succeed.
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Sheila Urednick

EDUCATION

M.A., English, Indiana University, 2020
Concentration: English
Thesis: *Gaming Mindset: Breaking the Stigma of Gaming, from “Ivl me on rust” to Textual Analysis*
Thesis Advisor: Rebecca Brittenham, Ph.D.

B.A., English, Indiana University, 2016

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

Instructor, Concord High School, 2017- Current
Courses: Freshman English Language Arts, Biblical Literature, Shakespeare, Creative Writing, AP Literature and Composition, Dual Credit Literature, Genres of Literature

Instructor, Ivy Tech, 2020
Course: Literature 206

AWARDS AND HONORS

Minor Art History Award for outstanding achievement in art history, 2015

Indiana University at South Bend Speech Winner, Spring 2006

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

Concord Teacher’s Association
Indiana State Teacher’s Association
National Educator’s Association