

# Community Versus Creator Analyzing Learning and Literacy in Video Games

NICK WORT

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Video games, unlike other forms of art, allow the player to interact with and participate in their virtual surroundings. Video games also require that the player learn certain control methods and the ways in which these methods function in the game. This creates a unique environment for learning, because the game must be able to teach and must take into account how it will provide information to players. Because of this factor, video games can (and should) be analyzed in a similar fashion to other types of learning environments. By communicating with players, and by utilizing critical understandings of learning and acquisition, we can begin to better understand video games as a medium of learning. Specifically, by analyzing an interview with a person who actively plays video games and is actively involved in an online video game community, we can see that video games push pre-defined outcomes and boundaries onto the user (in a similar fashion to Freire's banking concept). However, when utilizing Gee and Hayes' concept of the "passionate affinity space," we can see a counter narrative emerge within the community of the game, allowing a different, less restricted type of learning and acquisition of literacy to take place via interaction within the gaming community.

Video games, unlike other forms of art, uniquely allow the player to interact with and participate in their virtual surroundings. Video games also require that the player learn certain control methods and the ways in which these methods function in game. This creates a unique environment, because the game must be able to teach and must take into account how it will provide information to players. Because of this factor, video games can be analyzed in a similar fashion to other types of learning environments. By communicating with players, and by utilizing critical understandings of learning and acquisition, we can begin to better understand video games as a medium of learning. Specifically, in the interview discussed below, we can see that video games push pre-defined outcomes and boundaries onto the user (in a similar fashion to Freire's banking concept). However, when utilizing Gee and Hayes' concept of the "passionate affinity space," we can see a counter narrative emerge within the community of the game, allowing a different, less restricted type of learning and acquisition of literacy to take place.

In "The Banking Concept of Education," Paulo Freire describes two methods of learning, the "banking method" and the "problem-posing method". The banking method is described as a method by which teachers impart knowledge directly to their students, via lecturing and delivering facts. Freire describes this method as follows:

"The outstanding characteristic of this narrative education, then, is the sonority of words, not their transforming power. 'Four times four is sixteen; the capital of Para is Belem.' The student records, memorizes, and repeats these phrases without perceiving what four times four really means, or realizing the true significance of 'capital' in the affirmation 'the capital of Para is Belem.'" (257)

This method is in opposition to Freire's proposed method, called problem-posing. This method seeks to resolve the contradiction between student and teacher and create a system where both student and teacher are active participants in the learning process: "[F]rom the outset, her efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. His efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the students in their relations with them" (Freire 259). While Freire is explicitly talking about classroom learning experiences, we can take these two concepts and apply them to video games to gain a broader understanding of how video games work to teach the player.

It makes sense to begin our analysis of video games as a medium of learning with Freire's banking concept. Video games, by their very nature, have predetermined boundaries that the user must operate within. A player can

only take certain actions in game, and these actions are mapped to certain physical responses in the real world (you push a button on your controller, which causes your character to attack, for example.) In most games, players are also restricted to certain segments of the fantasy world the game creates—they cannot freely explore and are forced to stay in the areas that the game creator has made for them. This means that specific actions have determined outcomes and player possibilities are finite and predictable. This heavily gestures towards the banking concept, because learning becomes the process of memorizing actions and their outcomes and predicting how those actions will play out in any given situation. The banking concept applies to video games in an ideological sense as well. Because a game is designed by a human, it would not be surprising if certain ideological values from the games creator(s) appear in the game itself—as one might expect from any form of art. Because the creator(s) of the game is in control of how interactions work in the game's world, they are able to directly instill ideological messages. While this does not seem to hold significant meaning for the experience of the subject interviewed below, it is important to note the larger social and political stakes of the banking method in video games.

To further understand the world of gaming, we must look at the experiences of someone who is actively involved in gaming. For these insights, we will look towards a small series of interviews with Sarah, whose last name will be omitted to respect her privacy. Sarah is a 24-year-old woman living in Northern Indiana who has lived in this area all of her life. She works long, irregular hours in the mental health field and is actively pursuing a bachelor's degree in political science. Despite being incredibly busy, she still finds time for gaming and uses it as a self-described escape from the world. Gaming has a huge social significance for her as well. She notes that "it's sometimes easier to talk to people online than in person, because you don't have to look directly at them. It's just sometimes easier to talk to people that way." Sarah has been playing video games most of her life; she started playing a Nintendo Entertainment System when she was in elementary school and predominately played with her neighbors and school friends. Currently, she plays *Elder Scrolls Online* (ESO)—a large, multiplatform online role-playing game. She is active in an online guild<sup>1</sup> and seems to thoroughly enjoy the gaming experience.

We can see elements of Freire's banking concept when analyzing Sarah's experiences playing *Elder Scrolls Online*. The clearest example comes from the game mechanics directly showing the player what they need to do: "In

1. A guild is a group of players who participate in large, in-game quests.



*Elder Scrolls Online* and *Skyrim*<sup>2</sup>, there's an arrow you can follow to where you need to go [to complete in-game objectives]. And there are puzzles and stuff you sometimes need to figure out – but the game leaves hints for you; sometimes they can be right in front of you race." Here, we can see that the game is teaching players by instilling specific directions to lead them to a specific goal. There is no opportunity for the player to grapple with the problem and its outcome; these results are already determined by the game and taught directly to the player. This is somewhat expected, as it would be incredibly difficult for a large game to function without some sort of guidance. However, it is still important to note that this particular mode of instruction gestures towards the banking method.

While this does provide an important example of the banking concept in video games, Sarah brings up another, far more interesting example:

"When we do trials, it's 12 people in a large dungeon, and it's really hard – you really do need 12 people. It's usually two tanks, two healers and eight DPS...in [these dungeons] you have to listen to the person who is in charge, because if everyone is talking on the mic at the same time you can't hear anything. And you have to listen, because there are certain mechanics you have to follow or you won't get through it."<sup>3</sup>

Here, we see two possible examples that gesture toward the banking concept. We see Sarah mention that there are "certain mechanics you have to follow or you won't get through [the dungeon]." This is another example of the game specifically leading the player to a result via mechanics (as mentioned above). However, we also see Sarah mention that "in [these dungeons] you have to listen to the person who is in charge." Here, she is specifically referring to another player who is leading the group. This creates a hierarchical structure within the game between players, a structure that is seemingly built into the design of the game. Because of this design, learning via the banking method is pushed onto the player by the mechanics of the game, creating the need for someone to lead the dungeon.

While it does seem that this particular game, by its nature, teaches via methods that land closer to the banking concept, it is important to analyze

2. *Skyrim* is another popular video game that takes place in the same fantasy universe as *Elder Scrolls Online*.

3. "Dungeons" refer to specific, challenging areas in the game that require multiple players to complete. "Trials" refers to a specific, even more challenging type of dungeon. "Tanks," "healers," and "DPS" are specific roles characters will take on in the *Elder Scrolls Online* universe, though they're common roles in other multiplayer roleplaying games as well.

the counter-narratives visible in Sarah's description. There is certainly a strong element of community learning taking place, particularly in Sarah's acquisition of gaming literacy. When she first began playing *ESO*, Sarah had very little experience with massive multiplayer online games (MMOs) and the unique terms associated with these games. For example, she says, "There were so many times when [the guild] would use slang I didn't understand at first. There's just so much gaming terminology I didn't understand because I had never played an online MMO until I got *ESO*. I would just be like, what's that? What's PVP?<sup>4</sup> What's WTS—wanting to sell. There's just so much terminology I would have never thought about or learned if I hadn't been able to learn from the guild." She then goes on to further explain the process: "When I was new, I just kind of kept quiet and listened... but eventually I got comfortable with the guild and started to make sarcastic comments and... eventually, I became one of them." These examples provide an interesting glimpse into Sarah's acquisition of gaming literacy. Specifically, this acquisition is learned almost exclusively through community interactions and listening.

The element of community in gaming provides a different kind of education from the game's other methods of teaching. The acquisition of literacy Sarah is experiencing is removed from a traditional classroom and is not designed with any sort of ideological teaching in mind. In fact, it is not designed to teach at all; it is just the byproduct of being involved in a community. While the structure of this video game certainly leans towards the banking method, the ability for community, within this particular game, to teach a type of literacy in an organic fashion independently of the games creator(s) provides an interesting counterpoint. Because these communities are seemingly not seeking to teach more than mechanics and, because this literacy acquisition seems to be a product of immersion in a community, this does not seem to be a scenario we could describe using Freire's problem-posing method. We also see that the players are not able to directly grapple with the conditions of the game, as those are predetermined by the games creator (though, other games may function differently). Thus, it seems the method by which literacy is acquired in the *Elder Scrolls Online*, as illustrated by Sarah's example, does not provide a resolution to the problems of the banking method and does not resolve that contradictions of the banking method Freire points out. However, this form of learning does provide a counter current within a world that is largely determined and designed by outside forces. This ability to undermine the teaching structure of the game is incredibly interesting. With other types of games, a current like this could provide very

4. PVP refers to player vs player combat.



powerful consequences and interactions for both the game's creators and the players themselves.

While this shift does not encapsulate Freire's problem-posing method, it does gesture towards the concept of the "passionate affinity-based learning" and "passionate affinity-spaces" described by James Paul Gee and Elisabeth Hayes in "Schools and Passionate Affinity Spaces." This learning is described as follows: "Passionate affinity-based learning occurs when people organize themselves in the real world and/or via the internet (or a virtual world) to learn something connected to a shared endeavor, interest, or passion" (Gee and Hayes 69). A passionate affinity space is simply the space in which the passionate affinity-based learning occurs (Gee and Hayes 69). According to Gee and Hayes, a passionate affinity space must have certain characteristics: (1) People participating in the space and learning must associate "because of their shared endeavor or interest, not because of their 'credentials,'" (2) they must have "a deep passion for the common endeavor, not just a passing interest" and must "show that they respect and value the passion that fuels the most active people in the space," (3) they must allow all members to produce within the space, if they so choose, (4) they must allow flexible mentoring (different individuals lead at different times and in different situations), (5) knowledge must be distributed "in the sense that different people know different things and can share that knowledge when necessary...[N]o one person is expected to know everything all by themselves," (6) they must not be closed to new members (though they may have requirements for entry), and finally, (7) they must be "about sharing a common endeavor where people learn things, produce things or knowledge, and can, if they wish, become experts" (Gee and Hayes, 70-71).<sup>5</sup>

While Gee and Hayes provide a relatively long description, we can see that the guild community Sarah is a part of is incredibly similar to one of Gee and Hayes' passionate affinity spaces. To understand how the two descriptions relate, let us reexamine Sarah's insights about tackling the dungeon in ESO:

When we do trials, it's 12 people in a large dungeon, and it's really hard—you really do need 12 people. It's usually two tanks, two healers and eight DPS... in [these dungeons] you have to listen to the person who is in charge, because if everyone is talking on the mic at the same time you can't hear anything. And you have to listen, because there are certain mechanics you have to follow or you won't get through it.

5. From here on out, each of the elements of Gee and Hayes' passionate affinity space will be referred to by its corresponding number, in an effort to reduce confusion.

Her description contains several elements of the passionate affinity space. For example, we can see examples of characteristic 2, in that the guild members are committing large amounts of their time to the endeavor (thus signaling passion). We can see elements of characteristic 3 because members are allowed to participate in these larger quests if they choose, and they are participating within their character's role. We see elements of 5 in that each individual participating in the dungeon is performing a different role (each has a different "knowledge" they are bringing to the table), and we see elements of 7 in the way they all work towards a common goal and gain in-game skills through their endeavor. Let's again examine another of Sarah's points we have previously analyzed: "When I was new, I just kind of kept quiet and listened... but eventually I got comfortable with the guild and started to make sarcastic comments and... eventually, I became one of them." Here, we see strong elements of 6 in the slow introduction of a new person into the group. Based on these previous examples alone, we can see that Sarah's guild community is close to fitting the definition laid out by Gee and Hayes.

While the two reexamined quotes hit most of Gee and Hayes' definition, we are still left with characteristics 1 and 4 unfulfilled. However, one can reasonably assume that number 1 is met, as there are no formal credentials within the video game community (someone does not get formal training in video game playing, for example), meaning that all participants are there due to shared interests and their own eagerness to participate within the community. Section 4 is, however, not readily seen in any of Sarah's remarks. It does not seem outlandish to think that different individuals would lead at different times, based on their individual skill sets and the situation the group is currently in, though there is seemingly no formal evidence of this. As the community still predominately meets the definition and provides an outlet for learning to take place and for knowledge to be produced.

The affinity space like learning Sarah's guild participates in provides an important counter current to the more rigorous, banking style learning that the game forces on the user. While this knowledge and learning are tied to the game's internal logic and learning structure, their interactions and community are largely built on top of that. This means that Sarah's guild and similar groups (regardless of if they completely meet Gee and Hayes' definition) are able to undermine the learning forced on the user, because they are in control of their own space and crafting their own knowledge. However, it is important to note that the creation of this space does not resolve the contradictions Freire points out. Game players are not involved in the production of the game and thus the contradiction cannot be fully resolved. It is also important to note that the nature of video games does not really allow this,



as games are devolved by a highly skilled subsection of individuals. It seems, then, that communities like Sarah's guild must be embraced both as a way of understanding how learning takes place within video games and how that learning can be created by a community.

The world of gaming creates an interesting and complex sphere for learning, and the above analysis only begins to explore a small sliver of that world. With gaming becoming more and more common, this topic will continue to be relevant. Whether games are inadvertently teaching new literacies or intentionally instilling ideological messages, learning and acquisition are important aspects of video games as an artistic medium. When looking at Sarah and *Elder Scrolls Online*, it seems that the game pushes pre-defined outcomes onto the user, even when engaging in large group activities. However, when using the concept of a passionate affinity space and passionate affinity learning, a counter narrative emerges based around community, allowing a different and less restricted type of learning to take place.

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