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I-Search Narrative

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Controller Narratives: Video Games as a response to Defiance in Alt. Ed.

About three years ago I read *The Pedagogy of The Oppressed*, by Paulo Freire, and I have been taken with the idea that education should be an exercise in liberating students from outside influence, rather than a force that inculcates students to a worldview that has been vetted by a prior generation of curriculum designers. Freire writes that students should be the “Subjects” of education, not “objects” to be taught at (Freire, 1970). The philosophy that student experience should drive classroom goals and methods suits a generation that relaxes by engaging through games, politicizes as they socialize online, and who are technological natives, for better and worse. In short, I wanted to research ways to increase students’ sense of agency by giving them texts that have freedom of choice *built into* the structure of the narrative, and then as a class we will call into question the nature of that freedom through meta-cognitive responses and discussions.

The jumping off point for this paper, and my interest in using games as texts, was a 2013 article I found by Marcus Schulzke[[1]](#footnote-1) that discusses using video games in the classroom as thought experiments in the same way that classical philosophers use thought experiments (The Chinese Room, The Trolley Problem, etc.) (Schulzke, 2013). In the article, Schulzke discusses various games that I’ve personally played as “experienced thought experiments” rather than as classical thought experiments where the person considering the experiment is merely a static onlooker. Schulzke uses the critically acclaimed game *Bioshock* in a solid example of “game as thought experiment,”

“BioShock is an example of how video games can raise questions about free will and determinism. Although it is a linear game consisting in successive tasks that must be completed in a particular order, BioShock offers players the freedom to determine how they accomplish their objectives and even simulated moral decisions. Being allowed to make these decisions creates a feeling of control over one’s actions. However, near the end of the game, players find that the perception of free will was illusory, as the character they control was under the effects of mind control that forced him to act as he did. Thus, the game provides a convincing simulation of how one might feel a subjective sense of freedom while still being trapped within a predetermined path. This is a classic problem in the debate over free will and determinism—determining whether the subjective experience of freedom can be illusory” (Schulzke, 2013).

As a 11th and 12th grade ELA teacher at Phoenix, I want my students to wonder about the nature of their own freedom as individuals and as citizens. Many of my students have seen their personal freedoms curtailed by their own actions, or by being in close proximity to negative influences and then getting blamed for the fallout. Personal freedom and its positive expression are big themes in my classroom every year with my students, and I am very aware that they are not naturally interested in most of my texts before we begin the unit and I give connecting context and throw out my hooks to them[[2]](#footnote-2). What video games as philosophical thought experiments can do for my class is present a narrative structure that they are familiar with, while also presenting them with the sense of control and ownership that Defiant kids need to feel comfortable as discussed in a 2005 article in *Teaching Exceptional Children*, where the authors note that, “Educators can lessen power struggles with students by allowing them to make choices. Such choices can also foster their self-esteem” (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005).

Defiant students crave narrative control in the classroom, and when teachers run into trouble with an ODD kid, it is often because the teacher has allowed the student to guide them into a position where they now *must* operate as a punitive authority figure, handing narrative control over to the student (Wright, 2006). After working with ODD students for what will be my seventh year this Fall, I’ve come to feel that this impulse toward control is not rooted in a negative psychological place.

Oppositional Defiant students that I have known at Phoenix are often responding to previous negative experience with authority figures or other adults in their lives, abuse in many cases, and I’ve come to think their need for narrative control is a psychological defense against feeling like victims in their own personal narratives. All people prefer to be Paulo Freire’s “Subject,” we want to be the protagonist in our own stories. Students who are Defiant *demand* rather than *prefer* agency in their own education and this produces the power struggles that are so common with ODD students (Salend & Sylvestre, 2005).

Many of the students at Phoenix have severe deficits in literacy and numeracy that are caused by bouncing around other programs and districts before they arrive at our school, and this academic struggle compounds their need for a sense of personal control. They often feel that school is a structure they don’t have an aptitude for and can’t find a “win-state” in. By adopting a selection of video games as primary text options, I hope to provide students with ELA instruction targeted at the Common Core Literature standards, while also appeasing their need for a sense of control.

I believe that games-as-narratives have the potential to be therapeutic as well as educational. In a 2008 article in the English Journal, junior high teacher Kristie Jolley wrote about reaching out to reluctant readers by pushing book adaptations of big budget video games like the *Halo* series. Her study primarily focused on finding ways to onboard students who game but do not read recreationally (Jolley, 2008). Getting books into students’ hands is almost always a win for me, and I stress to parents that all reading their child can do will build fluency as long as it falls close to the student’s average lexile comfort level. The Jolley article is about the intersection between gaming and literacy through video game novellas, which is another possible outcome of bringing more gaming narratives into my room.

As Phoenix adopts the Summit model of education[[3]](#footnote-3) and partners with the Summit program next year, I am expanding my classroom structure to allow select students[[4]](#footnote-4) to choose their own primary texts, which is new ground for me as a teacher. I’ve always produced a primary text script and stuck to it, while doing other more student-driven work around the primary text core engine that drove us through the unit. By handing student choice of primary text over next year my units become less about the structure and lessons of a single story, and more about storytelling and narratives in different mediums.

I believe that including a selection of curated games on the list of literary options for my students will diversify the class discussions, as well as allow for students who think of themselves as gamers but also as “non-readers” to experience deep literary discussions and interrogate games that they play at an academic level placing students, “...on the path to becoming more critical about the ways media work in their lives—understandings that I hope will bleed over into other media that surround them.” (Ostenson, 2013).

I grew up with digital narratives that were primarily text based[[5]](#footnote-5) and though I was a voracious reader in high school and college, I know how much weight a player puts behind the last twenty minutes of a sixty-hour role-playing game can feel just as rewarding as the last twenty lines of a Kurt Vonnegut book. In setting up my room to facilitate intelligent and meaningful academic discussion of games, I’ll be following the directions of Andrew McMichael in choosing games to include in my class. In his 2007 article, McMichael discussed using games to explore history topics, and his suggestion to, “treat the problem the same way one would decide on a book to assign for class—get a bunch of them, play for a while, and then decide what to assign” (McMichael, 2007).

My primary goal for students in my room remains increasing their sense of agency in their own educational outcomes, so I’ll be adding games that have relatively rigid narrative arcs that center on protagonists exploring their own freedom or even directly discussing Ludo narrative dissonance like *The Stanley Parable*, a relatively new game where the player is the protagonist and the narrator is the antagonist (Ruggiero). I don’t get to do much surreal reading with my students, but I absolutely value the philosophical discussions we end up having at the end of texts like *The Things They Carried* and *Brave New World*, and I hope that introducing cerebral interactive texts to my classroom can act in exactly the same way the old philosophical thought experiments did, albeit for an audience that generally gets written off as incapable of the depth of reading required to provide context for those discussions.

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1. An utterly fascinating character, Marcus Schulzke researches in everything from militaristic gaming narratives to the ethics of political violence. It’s easy to fall down the research rabbit hole with a guy like this. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Macbeth is all about Scottish Clans, so it follows that King Duncan is a Gang Boss and Macbeth has aspirations to run the block, Brave New World is a collection of characters that attempt to defy their narratives, but keep getting sucked back into their old conditioning, and Gatsby is some dreamy putz who got played into being a patsy for the mob. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Summit is a California based LMS provider that focuses on project-based learning and providing students with personalized pacing through curriculum. It will be especially useful with our new 40 block schedule next year. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Students who contract to work independently through my class will be allowed to choose from a wide selection of Primary Texts including games but will have more complex artifacts to produce to prove their skill mastery. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Zork, Monkey Island, Myst, Kentucky Route Zero is a new one that is wonderful and based on The Odyssey and Southern Grotesque writing [↑](#footnote-ref-5)