Repurposing Video Games as Discussion Tools

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ABSTRACT

Numerous video games marketed entirely for entertainment purposes, also known as commercial, off-the-shelf (COTS) titles, can serve as an effective tool for teaching students complicated skills such as executive functioning, hypothesis testing, and critical analysis. In this phenomenological case study, I outline a pedagogical approach that harnesses the trinity of content knowledge, discursive prowess, and video game aptitude by capitalizing on pupils’ preference for digital integration. Video game titles were selected according to their scores on Rice’s (2007) “Video Game Higher-Order Thinking Evaluation Rubric” and “Video Game Cognitive Viability Scale,” with lessons tied to Florida’s Next Generation Sunshine State Standards for social studies. The implication of this study is that COTS titles offer an alternative curricular entry point, which can elicit higher-order discussions when paired with pointed, teacher-led inquiry. This methodology, if properly harnessed, could transmit subject manner more effectively and create critically reflective, game-based learning cohorts.

KEYWORDS
Social Studies Education, Curriculum and Instruction, Digital Game-Based Learning, Social Constructivism, Instructional Technology, Open World Video Games

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the 21st century, discussions surrounding digital gaming were frequently sensationalized by media outlets as behavior associated with addiction, sexism, violence, isolation, obsession, and mindlessness (Squire, 2004). As a result, the educational research community has primarily elected to disassociate itself from the controversial practice, ignoring the conspicuous connections between the long tradition of paper-based games and simulations utilized in social studies classrooms (Fisher, 2010). In recent years, however, many of these stigmatizing myths have been debunked, with longitudinal studies like Kühn et al.’s (2019) providing strong evidence that no linkage exists between gaming and aggressive tendencies. Moreover, numerous video games marketed entirely for entertainment purposes, also known as commercial, off-the-shelf (COTS) titles, can act as an effective tool for teaching students complicated skills such as executive functioning, hypothesis testing, and critical analysis within the confines of a relaxed virtual venue (Gee, 2005). COTS games, while brimming with technological affordances, have yet to be earnestly studied in classroom contexts. This investigation proposes an alternative method for teachers and students to meaningfully explore critical social studies themes by using open world simulation games that feature well-researched, three-dimensional environments.

According to the most current National Assessment of Educational Progress (2022), better known as “The Nation’s Report Card,” only 13%, 25%, and 20% of eighth graders performed at or...
above the proficient level in U.S. history, geography, and civics, respectively. This score represents no significant change from the previous exam (2018), which begs the following question: How can social studies educators provide inventive opportunities for pupils to interact with state-mandated content and reverse this trend of academic stagnation?

By incorporating virtual, interactive media in the classroom, otherwise known as game-based education, teachers can create an interdisciplinary nexus between social studies content and the cultural correlations present within these titles. Gaming simulations have a history of being employed in American school settings as a learning model to frame discussion around authentic tasks and new literacies (Metzger & Paxton, 2016). These activities are virtually revitalized in the form of semi-historical games, which draw upon historical concepts but are not bound to specific times or places (Wright-Maley, 2015). While the emphasis on utilizing mock-ups of reality for academic gains has led to an assortment of digital game-based learning (DGBL) research, most educators have neglected the expansive social contexts of classroom communities, choosing to myopically examine individual student’s interactions with COTS (Carretero et al., 2022).

The Entertainment Software Association (2023) reported that 65% of American households own a video game console, which amounts to 212 million individuals gaming for at least an hour a week. 75% of this demographic play regularly, understood as four or more hours per week, with puzzle titles being the most popular genre. Gilbert (2019) surveyed a diverse cross-section of U.S. teenagers and found that 97% reported being regular consumers of video games, with nearly 50% responding affirmatively to playing a video game in the past 24 hours. Additionally, female gamers now comprise 46% of the American market share, further discrediting the stereotype that this is a destructive, male hobby (Entertainment Software Association, 2023). Educators should harness this enthusiasm for digital entertainment by connecting it to pivotal classroom content that corresponds with the themes espoused by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and their C3 Framework, designed to prepare learners for college, careers, and civic life (2013a). Pupils should be encouraged through active, reflective participation, ensuring their observations are logged, analyzed, and discussed to stage teachable moments that explicitly connect the game to course instruction, seamlessly integrating the entirety of the learning experience (McCall, 2016).

Barab et al. (2009) declare that video games require students to engage in problem solving, ask insightful questions, adapt to new environments, and reflect on how their decisions affect their goals. The objective of game-based learning is to motivate people to change their behavior, develop skills, or drive innovation, thus allowing the educational institution to achieve its objectives (Burke, 2014). In his dissertation using the turn-based strategy title Civilization III (Firaxis Games, 2001) to teach high school world history, Squire (2004) determined that after engaging in discussion tailored around the learning goals of gameplay, student responses promoted greater understanding of social studies concepts, such as reading a map and recognizing the consequences of warfare.

While enthusiasm for the prospect of incorporating DGBL into classrooms does exist, Maguth et al. (2015) discovered that most literature on this topic is opinion-based, and the limited classroom duration demonstrates low retention rates, as the data analysis skills rarely transfer to other learning situations. In addition, video games as instructional tools are hampered by the difficulty to decipher substantial findings, as interpretations of important verbiage are skewed or conflicting across research paradigms (Gaydos, 2015). McCall (2016) upholds that if teachers recognize that these COTS video games function as an interpretation of the past and are treated critically in the same manner as a primary or secondary source, there is great promise for their continued application for instructional methods.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The philosophical model known as cultural consensus theory supposes that an external truth exists in the domain under investigation, meaning that learners share common experiences which comprise their reality (Weller, 2007). While consensus theory applies controlled questioning geared
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