Understanding the Video Game Experience through Reader Response Theory

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Abstract

The world of literacy has expanded alongside technology, and new literacies are being used as an alternative or an addition to traditional text. By including video gaming as literacy, the connection can be made between students' multimodal world outside of school with the world of literacy they encounter in school. As a way to look at the gaming experience, a case study of 15 participants examined three mainstream video games using Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory. In this qualitative study, interview transcripts about the gaming experience are coded for themes relating to reader response theory. The literature does not currently contain substantial research regarding how the gaming experience and reading experience are similar, so this study begins to add to the present literature by demonstrating that at least for these games the presence of the components of the theory can be evaluated in much the same way as the reading experience.

Keywords: Reader response, video games, new literacies, case study, Louise Rosenblatt

The New London Group (1996) recognized that a change of paradigm was occurring for literacy and the connected pedagogy. This change included recognition of the "multifarious cultures that interrelate and the plurality of texts that circulate" as well as the text forms connected to multimedia technologies (New London Group, 1996, p. 62). The defining term, resulting from the full year of discussions by this group of experts within the field of literacy and learning, was "multiliteracies," meaning the additional aspects of traditional literacy pedagogy. "Mere literacy" was a term coined for language-only communication contrasting with multiliteracies since it "focuses on modes of representation much broader than language alone" (p. 63).

As literacy transforms and includes digital literacies, educators must form an understanding about how learning relates to these new tools. Additionally, we can now begin to evaluate how aspects of the act of reading are morphing. One particular tool that is reshaping the world of literacy is video games. As commercial video games become more of a integral part of our culture, the role of the gamer must be examined in relationship to the role of the reader. By showing the parallel nature of these two roles, the changes the New London Group forecasted in literacy will begin to be part of the mainstay of defining literacy.

Review of Literature

The role of the reader is to be a producer of meaning instead of simply a consumer of the meaning of the text. Reader response theorists believe the reader is integral to the reading experience (Lye, 1996). The text is not single in meaning; the text and the reader combined create meaning and a transaction that is unique to that reading. Because of this connection, the experience is a vital aspect of Louise Rosenblatt's reader response theory.

Transactional Experience

Louise Rosenblatt established the transactional theory, which moves literacy instruction away from prescribed answers that the teacher or experts have established into more of an experience with literature. In order for the piece to be literary, the work must be experienced; the text must then relate to the reader to produce an experience (Rosenblatt, 2005b). Transactional theory explores the transaction of the reader and the text while making meaning. The transaction produces meaning, and its manifestation is the response of the reader to the text (Rosenblatt, 1978).

The transaction is what happens between the reader and the text during the reading event. The creativity of the reader affects this transaction as well as the personal experience of the reader. Because of this personal aspect, the context greatly influences the transaction; a reader can have a very different experience with the text at different times in life due to changes in circumstances (Rosenblatt, 1995). But the two stances do not have to exist totally void of one another. Instead, the stances are located on a continuum with efferent and aesthetic at each polar end. The interaction that occurs between the two ends of the continuum has been demonstrated in the literature (Irwin & Mitchell, 1983).

Rosenblatt (1995) contends that students are functioning on two separate levels of thought in the English classroom. On one level, students are learning ideas about literature that are established by and accepted by educators; the other level is where students are reacting to the literature from a personal standpoint. By not having a personal connection, students will simply be learning content about literature and "only a vague, feeble, or negative response will occur" (p. 56). A connection to past experience must happen; otherwise, the reader will not be prepared to fully absorb and digest the text. She explains that the reader must have the connection or "the work will not come alive for him, or rather, he will not be prepared to bring it to life" (p. 77).

Historically the reader has been left out of the reading equation, or at the very least, the reader is sanctioned to a backseat position. To contrast this passive position of the reader, Rosenblatt suggests the reader be moved into a much more active and visible role in reader response. In order for a reader to have a transaction with the text, s/he must be motivated – motivated to read – motivated to connect past experiences – motivated to bring in personality qualities. Without that level of motivation, the reader would not begin to engage, and engagement is the key to the transaction occurring within the reader.

Reader Response Connection to Gaming

But as the language arts classroom evolves and technology broadens the realm of

literacy, theory must adapt as well. As with all forms of 'serious play,' from aesthetic experiences to hobbies to even scholarship itself, novel reading complicates and enriches the notion of 'fun'" (Alberti, 2008, p. 263). As this inclusion of new literacies occurs, engagement with learning can be strengthened by encouraging students' connection and transaction with new literacies. That encouragement is crucial for teachers to establish because efferent and aesthetic reading are necessary: "knowing how to use a text in the right place and time is as important as knowing how to 'decode' it" (Gee, 2010, p.18).

Connecting reader response theory and gaming has been evident in research about creating and playing games (Curtner-Smith, 1996; Gaudart, 1999). Typically, these studies focus on more efferent stances related to learning, such as recalling specifics, memory, and noticing differences in text, and the text is seen as the center of learning. Even though there are not numerous studies about gaming and reader response, the literature regarding such a connection is starting to be established.

Developing Literacy Through Gaming

Teachers may be reluctant to use gaming in the classroom simply because of its connection to entertainment, and the gaming industry may not be fully marketing to schools because of their connection to "learning," which could be translated into "boring." Most research involves study of simplistic games that are not equal to commercial video games (Cordova & Lepper, 1996); the majority of studies on gaming before Squire (2004) did not even include commercial games. Complexity and difficulty also play a part in how integral gaming can be in school learning. Typically games used by teachers have not been very complex so that students could learn the games quickly and easily in short periods of time. Most quality video games can take 30-100 hours of play in order to win (Gee, 2007).

Just because gaming is in a medium different from that to which teachers are accustomed does not mean that the value decreases: "Young people's literacy activities in the semiotic domain of gaming may prepare them to operate, communicate, and exchange information effectively in a world that is increasingly digital and transnational – and in ways that their formal school does not" (Selfe, Mareck, & Gardiner, 2007, p. 30). Thus the world of literacy is changing, and with such a change, literacy is now inclusive of video game play. Adding gaming to the language arts classroom and the world of literacy means that games must be evaluated in all their complex splendor, meaning the visual and semiotic and interactive nature of the game must be considered wholly as text instead of looking at only one part of the game as text. Even though a game may be a narrative and contain characters much like print text, gaming as its own structure works with additional aspects such as images and interactive play. Thus, the way we view traditional print text as literacy cannot be the complete lens through which we view this new area of literacy.

Visual Literacy

In order to explore the ways gaming can have merit as literacy, the connection between visual literacy and gaming must be established. A limited amount of research has

explored the value of the connection of visual image and text. Visual literacy does not replace traditional literacy; instead "the use of images supplements and complements the linguistic composition" (Zoss, 2009, p. 187). The New London Group (1996) has highlighted the connection of the visual images in relationship to written words as significant for literacy teaching and learning. Traditionally, text has been defined as "a passage of print or a slice of speech, or an image" (Lankshear, 1997, p. 45). But text has now been broadened to include much more; students are now involved in reading/viewing from a multimodal perspective, which calls for teachers to include the new literacies in the classroom literacy experience (Bearne, 2005). As visual literacy makes its way into the defining structure of literacy, the research must include it also. Just as the decoding of text has always been an important component of literacy, the decoding of graphics, charts, maps and other aspects is now considered significant. Consequently, researchers have been giving attention to structures for visual decoding (Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, & Cammack, 2004).

Aristotle believed images are connected to knowledge. In order for a reader to experience the text, s/he must have some level of knowledge as a basis for the experience (Thompson, 1988). Some educators fear that visual media detract from text. However, teachers have observed struggling writers constructing text with much more vivid imagination when a visual is included in the assignment. Thompson (1988) finds in her own experience with low-performing high school writers that these students wrote more fluently about a picture than a traditional prompt. The students

needed an image to assist them in finding "their own internal flow of images as material to write about" (p. 48). Colby and Colby (2008) suggest an English course focusing on the game World of Warcraft (WoW) where students would write and conduct research based on the game. The students would write documents that they determined to be important and create text that was meaningful within a community of gamers.

The visual arts have been studied in connection with struggling readers. Students who discussed the meaning of visuals accompanying text found this connection gave the reader/viewer a stronger ability to enter and participate in the world of the text (Zoss, 2009). The connection provided a stronger understanding of the text. Beach and O'Brien (2009) studied 7th and 8th grade students participation in a Literacy Lab, a media-based program for students who were at risk of failing in reading. One of the important skills taught to these students was the ability to work with multimedia tools in connection with their reading and writing assignments. Students are able to critically examine text by juxtaposing images. Other assignments had students examining the meaning of images in relation to text; images were found to be important to the development of their reading skills.

Most classrooms do not connect image and language, yet that type of connection is how most students function outside of school and will need to function as adults in a very rich multimedia world. A 2006 study found that college students spent an average of 11 hours per day using some type of media

or digital communication, which meant that they were engaged in communication combining image and language (Beach & O'Brien, 2009). Modern literacy should embrace the visual and language connection that is now normal and commonplace in the structure of society's communication.

The incorporation of both image and text does not confuse or bombard the reader/viewer. Instead that combination reflects the modern student's way of life. Neural scientists suggest brains are changing to increase efficiency in accommodating the increase in multi-visual images with text (Beach & O'Brien, 2009). Students are easily able to multi-task between texting, listening to MP3 files, and skimming a website; "students are accustomed to communicating through the combination of print with visual, sound, and tactile texts" (p. 778). Adding another sign system to language can expand the dimension of resources for the student and teacher; images can be valued as much as text (Zoss, 2009).

Finding Meaning in Gaming through Semiotics

Video games are a family of semiotic domains comprised of various genres. Just as in literature, video games have genres (role-playing, adventure, etc…) (Myers, 2003). Apperley (2006) defines the genre for video games as games that share similarities in narrative and visual elements as well as in the area of interactivity. The way the action is perceived and performed plays an important role in determining genre. Within genres, the particular types of games employ a semiotic system. The relationship between the signified and signifier is significant in the meaning making process, and the

various genres of video games create that relationship differently. In action games, the signified is actually within the game, but simulation games place the signified elsewhere (Myers, 2003). For example, flight simulation games make reference to other semiotic systems instead of establishing a unique system within the game. Role-playing games emphasize symbol transformations with the signification process as the same in the game as in social interactions. Since this genre involves multiple players, contextual significations are required. Action games use denotative signs to create a common context for players. Many oppositional relationships exist in this genre, and meaning can be immediately understood (Myers, 2003).

Codes for social semiotics include the cultural reference as a code within itself. Danesi (1994) defines culture as a macrocode: "consisting of the numerous codes which a group of individuals habitually use to interpret reality" (p. 18). Ranker (2006) found that specific content and codes were used within various genres of video games. The participant, Adrian, talked about his drawings with Ranker to share video game knowledge but also for Adrian "to put his meaning into words so that he might go on to write about it" (p. 23). The meaning was derived because Adrian was able to use codes with which he was familiar as the basis for the discussion. The codes being used in the particular game were context-based for that game; Adrian derived meaning from his video game experience in the way Rosenblatt discusses deriving meaning through particular times under particular circumstances. For

example, in one conference, Adrian made reference to the term "warp," which Ranker must explain as a function in the game that allows a character to be moved to another location in the game. Meaning for this term is different for a player who has contextual knowledge within the culture of the game.

Ranker (2006) discovered that video games include a narrative component. Because of this, Ranker could relate aspects of traditional literature to gaming; Ranker asked Adrian to discuss characterization within his video game, and Adrian used drawings to begin this conversation. Only Adrian (or a player steeped in the culture of the game) could read those drawings appropriately because specific signs and codes were used that depended on the cultural connection. By using the participant's specialized knowledge about a particular video game, Ranker developed suggestions for use by the student in writing conferences. The suggestions were meaningful because they were working with "images informed by video games" (p. 23). Rosenblatt (1995) discusses words as "merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols" (p. 25). Meaning is created and a transaction can occur because the reader is able to construct meaning from the signs just as Adrian constructed meaning about characterization through the familiar codes of his game.

One teenage boy who participated in a three-year study created meaning through a specific cultural experience and semiotics (Burn, 2008). During the first year, the participant was interviewed about his gaming experience. In the second year, he created a game using provided software, and in the final year, he created a sec-

ond game. The participant's created games demonstrated that he included elements that are typically connected to traditional literacy. Burn found that semiotic analysis must be connected with the cultural world of the student, which in this case was the world of gaming, because the creation of the game (or the text) is connected to the individual's experience.

Boys were successful readers and writers (contrary to some research) in Sanford and Madill's study (2007) in less traditional areas of literacy not recognized by schools nor teachers. The study focused on adolescent males involved in literacy through video game play. The participants were instructors (ages 11-16) at a summer video game camp who participated in focus group interviews. The study revealed that the participants found numerous opportunities to learn in the areas of operational and cultural literacy. Implications from this study demonstrated that more research about learning with the new literacies was needed of the extent to which students are entering the classroom with prior experiences from this realm.

Ranker's case study (2006) focused on an eight-year-old boy who used his experiences with the video game Gauntlet Legends in his writing and drawings. The participant was resistant to traditional literacy; he preferred drawing to writing. Several insights were discovered through Ranker's interactions, which consisted of writing conferences with the participant. Visual modalities are a strong component of video games, so the participant used drawing as part of his writing process. Inclusion of visuals suggested that

the writing notebook could be considered a design notebook to allow students to explore meanings in different modes. Also, video games are written in a nonlinear format, but narratives written in school settings are written almost exclusively in a linear format. Video games are interactive with the gamer, who can make decisions about action and characters to affect the path of the game and narrative. The study suggested that a nonlinear format can be explored with students in writing. The nonlinear format is familiar to gamers and used effectively when they begin to write and make meaning within their own narratives. This familiarity with non-linear experience can make all the difference in being able to have a full transaction. Ranker (2006) does just what Rosenblatt suggests by connecting traditional literacy (writing) with the participant's own world (gaming) in order to produce a transaction.

An interesting connection between gaming and traditional schooling is made in a case study by Abrams (2009). The participants of this case study were advanced video game players who played at least one hour per day and at least four days a week. The students did not recognize themselves as strong students at school. Descriptive coding was used to track when students connected academics to their video gaming experiences. The coding was organized into four areas: prior knowledge, remembering, comprehension, and past experience. Abrams found that the participants' game play contributed to building the schema needed for their traditional work at school. For example, one student was able to draw upon his understanding of the Normandy invasion from a video game sequence about World War II with which he was

very familiar. All three participants discussed their distaste for school, yet they all showed excitement about classes and projects they could connect to their gaming experience. The context of the academic information had to be related to the gaming environment in order for the students to fully grasp the educational content in the classroom; the key to grasping is connection to experience. Gaming does not have to be a part of the traditional school day in order for students to call up those experiences and build them into schema that can further their knowledge and excitement about learning.

Just as a reader uses semiotics when reading, a gamer uses semiotics when gaming. The connection between gaming and reading is apparent through the use of semiotic domains and can help establish the beginnings of the parallel between the gaming experience and the transactional experience when reading. The similarities between gamers and readers was detailed by Journet (2007) who says that both groups must "find patterns among details, to organize information in relevant ways, and to map relationships using a range of semiotic systems" (p. 106).

Gaming Experience

Attempts have been made to compare the gaming experience with the reading experience (Aarseth, 1997; Murray, 1997; Rush, 2005; Ryan, 2002), yet an exact comparison is difficult since reading and playing video games have important differences. Instead, a parallel can possibly be made between the transactional experience in reading and the gaming experience. One way to view the

gaming experience is to realize that the experience is based on the outcome of what transpires between the individual and technology (McCarthy & Wright, 2004). Considering this view, one avenue to understand the gaming experience is to use evaluation methods that look directly at the interaction between the player and the game. The relationship between the gaming experience and reader response theory is evident because the meaning of playing the game "resides in the relationship between action and outcome" (Salen, 2007, p. 317).

Research Design

The paradox of the case study is the view that the individual leads to the ability to understand the universal. This paradox lends a creative element to research by studying the truth of the unique in order to grasp a more comprehensive (or generalized) view (Simons, 1996). A multiple case study is used to see the differences between cases with a goal "to replicate findings across cases" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p. 548). Stake (2005) uses the term collective case study when more than one case is being examined instead of the term multiple case study. This is a collective case study of three cases that can be viewed in relationship to each other. Each case consists of the five gamers within each group. The case study attempted to answer the following research questions:

1. What aspects of reader response theory are displayed through video game play in the gaming experience?

    A. What similarities are found between the gaming experience as described by gamers and the key components of stance and

transaction found in Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory?

Profile of Participants in Case Study

Participants were placed into three groups according to their preferred video game; each group consisted of five participants. The results were reported according to how the emergent themes were demonstrated in each case study, which is grouped according to chosen video game. Participants were asked to provide age, ethnicity, and gender at the beginning of the interview. The majority of participants were White, with five non-White participants. Females outnumbered (total of 9) male participants (total of 6) in the study. Two groups of siblings were involved in the study, although each group played different games. The Sims Freeplay participants had been playing for at least one year; Halo 1 participants had been playing four to six years; WoW participants had been playing for three to eight years.

Interviews

The participants were interviewed using questions regarding their gaming experience when playing the specific video game of their choice as well as questions about their general gaming experiences; thus, the interviews were semi-structured. The established interview questions were developed from Alberti (2008) who poses questions to understand the "gaming experience," and those questions were used while interviewing the participant to demonstrate how a gamer views her/his gaming experience. Alberti (2008) poses these questions as rhetorically to consider the connection between the gam-

ing experience and the reading experience. These questions were used as a foundation for the semi-structured interview, as a way to connect the two experiences for the participant. Three other questions were adapted from reading inventory questions (Vacca, J., Vacca, R., & Gove, M., 1991) to give a sense of the history of the gaming experience for the participant. Further questions were developed that might relate the gaming experience to the levels of personal understanding and efferent/aesthetic scale. Since the interviews were semi-structured, follow-up questions were used to encourage the participant to add depth to answers given to the established interview questions.

Coding Process for Interviews

The interviews (Spradley, 1979) were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using the descriptive coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Wolcott, 1994), each transcript text was read three times, and participant responses were given descriptive codes summarizing their responses. Descriptive coding "summarizes in a word or short phrases – most often as a noun – the basic topic of a passage of qualitative data" (Saldana, 1994, p. 70).

All of the participants answered similar questions in their interviews, so themes found after the descriptive coding of transcripts were connected to the questions asked during the interview. Additionally, importance was given to any prominent themes emerging from the texts with regard to a relation to Rosenblatt's reader response theory. A list of emerging themes was constructed from the descriptive codes and then connected to Rosenblatt's transactional theory in order to understand how the gaming experience is similar to the reading experience.

Results

Interview Data

This study examined how a gamer's experience with playing the video game may be parallel to the transaction in reader response. The interview transcripts were coded with descriptive codes and read three times to code responses that connected to either stance or the transaction. Once the transcripts were coded according to these parameters, themes emerged related to either stance or transaction (see Table 1).

Personal Connection to Video Games Choice of Genre

The Halo 1 participants believe that playing in first person gives them a better experience of actually living through the character than playing in third person where the player can see the character from an outside view. Iris talked about how she feels more connected to the game when she can see the game through the eyes of the character. Sherry explained that playing in first person is easier for her to understand than third person play because she can "understand the spatial relation that way and how to direct the character." She must be completely immersed in becoming the character to efficiently operate the game in order to have a good gaming experience. But Alex suggested that being in first person goes beyond operating the game: "…it's more of an actual experience than it is just playing a game…I think that alters your perspective so that you're experiencing something rather than just playing the game."

In contrast to these lived-through experiences favored by Halo 1 players, the Sims

Freeplay players admitted that simulation is not their favored game genre and report a much different experience while playing. Only one of the Sims FreePlay participants reported simulation as her favorite type of game; they preferred other genres, such as puzzle and logic games. They were not as concerned with living through the experience as with just accomplishing the tasks set before them in the game and described their experience as an "escape from reality." Laura described playing Sims Freeplay as a "way to waste time like if I'm waiting for something and got some extra time." Another commonality among all the Sims Freeplay players was that they liked this game because they can play it for a short period of time throughout the day instead of having a long gaming session, and Danielle, the only participant who identified simulation games as her favorite genre to play, specifically pointed out that being able to "play the game in bits and pieces throughout the day" is her main motivation for liking the game. The decision to play the game is not about a strong connection to the game. All of these participants reported playing simply to fight boredom or to have "a little entertainment." When discussing the events of the game, the Sims Freeplay participants provided only literal meanings of what happens within the game. On Cox and Many's (1992) levels of personal understanding (LPU) chart, their responses were contained at the first level, which is in the world of the text.

WoW participants enthusiastically described RPGs as their favorite genre of game to play. One commonality found among the players when they detailed why RPG is their favorite genre was the challenging and interactive nature of RPGs. Nick plays WoW exclusively now,

and he thinks the challenge the game provides is why he does not need to play other games: "You always have to play well when playing with other people because what one person does affects you, and what you do affects them and you have to adapt to their skills. That's actually a challenging part of the game." Another aspect to the challenge is the element of strategy because, as Mark pointed out, "there is more strategy behind the role-playing game than just the simple point and click or driving around a racetrack or whatever." Mark further explains that RPGs are challenging because of the thinking process behind working through aspects of the game, and he prefers that in a video game genre. Another part of the challenge is the creative options provided in the game. Nick describes WoW as "an entire world so you can keep creating constantly." The idea of creation is important to all the WoW players in the study. All the WoW participants mentioned the design and creation of characters as a reason they enjoy this game and genre; for example, Billy explained, "you have to create a backstory for your character that really keeps you interested in the character." Relationship with the Game

All but one Halo 1 participant had read the books associated with the lore related to the game, and the one participant who has not read the books is familiar with them and has discussed their content with other players. Three of the Halo 1 participants described reading online information related to Halo on a weekly basis, while the other two participants read related information on a monthly basis. In similar fashion, WoW par-

ticipants had a strong connection to the game that extended beyond simply playing the game. All five WoW participants spend time each week doing outside research about the game and/or reading lore associated with the game; four of the five participants even designate a specific time each week devoted to outside reading. Lisa described this connection by saying, "so even though I'm not reading the storyline or lore all the time there's so many other things to be reading because I feel like I'm always looking things up just to stay really into the game." Jordan is a guild master and expects everyone in his guild to research the raid before going into raid, and if the members do not do their research prior to the raid, they must leave the guild. Nick has the same rule in his guild. In stark contrast, Sims Freeplay participants do not report spending any time outside of playing the game for research or reading. One participant, Danielle, does receive a monthly e-newsletter but only spends a few minutes skimming the information. Danielle also visits a Sims website to discover new additions to the game, but she only briefly visits the site once every few months.

Game Completion

Alex explained that he is compelled to play a game until completion only if "the storyline is engaging" within the game; if not, he can just enjoy the action of the game and turn it off at any time. Brett agreed by explaining that he prefers playing games that have a "strong and interesting storyline making me [him] have to finish and beat the last boss." Having to finish the game or reach an ending point was a common theme among the Halo 1 participants; Sherry described this push forward as "You know the game is pushing you toward something and

you're just in the story and you have to keep going." All of the Halo 1 players described Halo 1 as a game that engages them to the point that they must keep moving forward in the game to reach an end point.

WoW is not a game designed with an ending per se; players can reach a certain level to open up new content but not an ending. Mark explained that when he plays other types of games, he might feel compelled to get to the end, but with WoW, he just wants to move forward and discover new content. The other WoW participants focused on the same point when discussing the importance of reaching the end of the game. Nick and Jordan discussed progressing through the game (or leveling) as much more important than finishing. Jordan explained, "the beginning is the learning and then 85 comes and you really start playing. It's another beginning." In fact, he went on to say, "the game doesn't start until max level." Some of the WoW players saw reaching max level as a type of completion of the game as Billy described: "I play my character to ultimately get to the end which is being at the max level and doing max level things." Even though the players may have seen the max level as an ending of sorts, they wanted to reach that level in order to move forward into more challenging content. And some players discussed how there is no real ending to WoW because of expansions and updates; Lisa described her desire for more content: "There's always going to be something else…more. There's always going to be an update. The expansion is coming out next month and there's going to be so much more to do, so it's like you

kinda don't want it to end in a way." Even though they do not want an ending, they want to move forward and reach levels of accomplishment.

In contrast, the Sims Freeplay participants did not see importance in finishing the game; as Rhonda pointed out, "…there's no reason to end because it's just the same stuff all the time…you're just doing the same thing." The other Sims Freeplay participants agreed that an ending is not necessary. Danielle explained that she normally does like to reach completion in other games, but in Sims Freeplay, "it's just something I can always do when I need to be entertained or something."

Distance from Reality

All of the participants specifically listed a break from reality as one of their favored aspects of their chosen games. Even though the Sims Freeplay participants were performing mundane and reality-based tasks (feeding characters, going to work, going to the bathroom, etc…), they all specifically stated that the game gives them a break from reality. Halo 1 participants talked at some length in their interviews about Master Chief and the Covenant in a very realistic manner even though the characters are futuristic and imaginary. WoW players acted in a similar manner when talking through the different characters, spells they can cast, and fantasy gear they can collect.

Gaming Experience

Lived-Through Experience

Three themes emerged from the data that were about participating in the gaming experience: describing, watching, and cheating the experience. Since all three were about the ac-

tive involvement of living through the gaming experience, they are grouped together.

Describing the Experience

The participants each discussed their own description of their gaming experience. All but one Sims Freeplay participant mentioned briefly that the game does have a connection to the real life and described how the game requires money made at a job or tasks to buy items and create an easier life for their characters, which is much like real life. The WoW and Halo 1 players discussed such a relationship between the game and a greater meaning in much more depth. Mark discussed how he uses walk-through websites to help him when he has encountered a challenge in WoW that he cannot readily figure out. He likened facing challenges in the game to challenges in life: "Like I mean just like in everyday life if you have a problem you can't solve there's nothing wrong with asking for help." Both Nick and Billy listed nerfing as the only aspect of WoW that they dislike. Nerfing is the action taken by video game creators to lessen the power or desirability of an element in the game. Nick and Billy reported that when nerfing is used in WoW it is due to less skilled gamers needing help to advance in the game. Nick explained that such an artificial adjustment to the game "just isn't how real life goes" because in real life "working hard and being better at something is [are] good and people don't get a break at their jobs and stuff just because they don't know how to do something very good." Billy echoed this idea Nick describes when he explained that nerfing takes away from the experience for him because it shows players

that if they are not as accomplished at game play then the designers will step in and help them; this type of help "isn't given to you in life and just isn't right."

Watching as Experience

All of the Halo 1 players discussed how they have watched other players play the game for at least one hour, possibly longer, and while their experience of watching does not fully equal the experience of playing, they reported having a gaming experience in that circumstance. Several Halo 1 players remarked that they knew players who were not as skilled whom they believed could have a better gaming experience by watching a more skillful player.

WoW players echoed the responses from the Halo 1 players. All of the WoW participants discussed watching another gamer play as fulfilling even though they each added that actually playing the game supplies them their preferred gaming experience. Alex explained this best when describing a recent experience he had watching two teams play Defense of the Agents 2: "…and watching how they were playing the game and admire their skill I would consider that a gaming experience." Nick, a WoW player, explained watching the game as a gaming experience: "When I'm watching a game I mean I'm having an experience because when I watch my brother play I like watching it because I like watching everything he's doing and seeing the skills he's utilizing and seeing all the cool stuff going on. I think it's definitely a cool experience." Likewise, Jordan discussed watching walk-through videos online and felt he definitely had a gaming experience watching those videos. Danielle, a Sims Freeplay player, explained why watching is a positive experience

for her because "I [she] have [has] really bad hand and eye coordination so I [she] can't always work the controllers but I [she] can watch him play and figure things out and I [she] like[s] that." Even though Danielle (and other Sims Freeplay players) agreed that watching game play gave them a gaming experience, they did not prefer to watch Sims Freeplay; instead, they discussed watching other video games when having a vicarious gaming experience. Several participants discussed watching their siblings play a game which lead to their wanting to actually play the game because they had a gaming experience while watching the game play. Lisa believed that watching a game could provide a gaming experience depending on the knowledge base of the person watching. For example, she thought a person who was not a gamer would not have a gaming experience by simply watching; whereas, to an avid gamer watching could because the gamer would have knowledge of what was happening during the game play. Mia, a Sims Freeplay player, talks about how she has a gaming experience when watching (although she excluded watching Sims Freeplay) because she feels a real involvement in the game: "It doesn't matter if you're sitting there watching it or playing it you're still wanting to turn left or turn right or shoot this gun or that gun and you're having the experience."

Cheating the Experience

The Halo 1 players participating in the study were all in agreement that cheating should not be tolerated when it impacts another's game play. Sherry even went so far as to describe those who do not cheat as be-

ing "legitimate players." She also questions how a cheating gamer can even enjoy the game: "But in a game like Halo, I don't see how gamers with cheats would really have a good experience because it is about the skill of the player instead of just running through the action." This same idea of lack of skill was echoed in the responses of other Halo 1 participants' responses. Brett described the connection between lack of skill and cheating by explaining "you're really cheating yourself more than cheating another player because you're cheating yourself out of the experience." He went on to explain that gamers who cheat are actually having a "watered down" experience and Iris agreed saying that cheating is pointless because "it's not really playing the game." Anna admitted she reports players when she discovers them cheating because "cheating takes from the skills." Alex began a website for a community that focuses on reporting cheaters and shutting them out of game play. Alex believes that cheaters are having a gaming experience "but it's an altered synthetic gaming experience." He described cheating players as those who could not have success any other way in the game.

WoW participants' responses were in alignment with the responses from the Halo 1 participants. All of the WoW participants were against cheating and felt it robbed the player of an authentic gaming experience. More specifically, all of the WoW participants expressed confusion about why a player would even choose to cheat. Nick and Mark discussed how cheating does not allow the player to experience the challenges. He felt that a lack of challenges would greatly diminish the true gaming experience. Billy explained that if a player cheats in

WoW, he stopped playing with that person and reported the cheater, but he also admitted that if the cheating did not affect his own game play, then he might be willing to ignore it. Jordan admitted he has known people who have cheated in WoW and been kicked out of the game, but he does not understand the allure of cheating since he believes the cheater will be caught and not be able to play. The possibility of not being able to play is too high a price for him to cheat. Lisa also expressed dismay over why players would want to cheat: "It seems like a waste of time because you're not really experiencing the game."

In contrast, the Sims Freeplay participants did not take issue against cheating in the game. In fact several participants admitted to cheating. Danielle said she encourages other players to cheat because she thinks that players need more money to buy more things in the game. Laura and Rhonda were the only Sims Freeplay participants to classify cheating as wrong because it takes from the experience, but they did not have a problem with other people's cheating as long as the cheating did not affect their own game play. Cindy expressed a similar stance by saying "if you're playing by yourself, I see no problem with it." She admitted to using cheat codes frequently in the game to move ahead. Mia believed players who cheated for their own gain and did not affect others should be allowed to cheat. She did not approve of using cheat codes to hurt another player, "but if you're using it for your own personal game then that's fine."

Implications

The incorporation of video games in the classroom may prove difficult for educators. More research is needed to understand exactly how video games can be included in curriculum due to the complexity of video games and the time and effort that must be put into understanding and mastering a video game (Gee, 2003). Video game content is certainly a factor that educators must consider when including games in the classroom. Different levels of violence can be present in video games, and the entire genre of FPS is based on the player assuming the role of a shooter. Playing the role of a shooter is a part of the game that educators and parents might not be comfortable with when it comes to young players. In addition to violence, some RPGs do require the players to use and become familiar with magic spells and potions. Parents could have a problem with their children learning about magic and/or committing violent acts while playing the game. Curriculum developers have to be aware of these types of features present in games so as to avoid the inclusion of such controversial topics. Additionally, some video games are going to be largely based in trivial actions. Sims FreePlay is a good example of a game that does not have any level of depth with meaningful content and does not require players to think through strategy or do any kind of research. Games with this type of play are easy to learn and navigate, but the content is not intellectually demanding.

The results from the study view the response of the gamers in terms of Rosenblatt's transactional theory. In this study, the data from the interviews were viewed through the reader response lens in order to see if the gamers are engaging in a gaming event that uses the reader response approach. The key components of stance and the transaction were examined in the interviews about the gaming experience. Data demonstrated that the Halo 1 and WoW players tended to have a more aesthetic response to their gaming experience than the Sims FreePlay participants.

Demonstrating a connection between reader response theory and gaming is one way of understanding gaming as an actual literacy that may have similarities to traditional literacy. The parallel between the gaming experience and reading experience was demonstrated in the results as well as an understanding of the foundations of how the transactional experience is just as present in gaming as in reading.

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Table 1.

Themes Related to Rosenblatt's Transactional Theory

Themes Found in Transcript Texts	Transactional Theory Key Tenets
Personal Connection to Video Game	
• Choice of Genre	
• Relationship with the Game	Efferent-Aesthetic Stance
• Game Completion	
• Distance from Reality	
Gaming Experience	
• Lived-Through Experience	
o Describing the Experience	Transaction
o Watching as Experience	
o Cheating the Experience	

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