Leveling up: A teacher's personal journey of bringing video games into a school and classroom

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📕 Item Details

🔑 Key points

- **What is this?** This is a description of how I brought video games into my school and classroom over time, influenced by my own experiences and education.
- **Why did you make it?** I want to share what I have done with other teachers as it represents my own learning and decision making as a teacher based on my experience and continued education through graduate studies.
- **Who is it for?** Teachers, teacher candidates, graduate students, school administrators, other school staff, researchers, and parents.

Tweet synopsis

A teacher's narrative on growing up with video games, pursuing graduate studies on gaming in education, and bringing them into school and classroom practice. *#gametolearn #gamebasedlearning #edtech #schoolengagement*

View at the LLP Playground:

https://www.llpjournal.org/2020/05/31/mcfadyen-leveling-up-games-in-school.html

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1. Introduction

As a child and adolescent in the 1990's, I was a gamer and I always thought that there was a feeling in society that video games were "bad" for you. I recall hearing adults saying that games "were a waste of time" and that they would "rot your brain." Other kids would call you a "nerd" if you played a lot of games and they were not really something that you could talk about in a classroom and be taken seriously. As I looked around me, playing video games was not something that adults did. There were stories in books, in articles, and on television about how bad they were for you, how they led to violence, and how they contained negative messages. One example is Eugene Provenzo (1992) who criticized video games for their use of violence, gender bias, and stereotyping; and their social and educational impact. There are also others such as Tracy Dietz (1998) who wrote that video games depict stereotypical gender roles for women, and this may negatively influence the attitudes of children towards women and relationships, while adversely affecting the ability of women to attain gender equality (p.439).

As I entered adulthood, I began to see a shift happening around me as more and more people were starting to play games online with the advent of services such as Xbox Live and the widespread adoption of smartphones and tablets. Friends of mine were playing games with their children, video games were being featured on television programs that were not just for kids, and there were academics starting to write about the positive impacts of games. James Paul Gee (2003), for example, suggested that massively multiplayer games allow players to collaborate using different skills, share values and knowledge, and could be better locations to prepare students for the modern workplace compared to traditional schools.

When I began teaching in 2009, I saw value in video games, but truthfully I was hesitant about bringing them into my school other than making them a discussion topic from time to time or using them as a quick example to illustrate a concept. I knew that they motivated my students, but I lacked the confidence to integrate them explicitly in my lessons. There was still this stigma in my mind, and as a beginning teacher I did not feel comfortable taking a risk in this area. Over the past 11 years I have gained more experience as a teacher and have continued my own education pursuing the use of games in schools as a research topic. In this article my aim is to explore my own use of video games as a teacher while also discussing the video game clubs that I run at my school as places to teach digital and media literacies.

2. Background

I am a multimedia and technology teacher in a Canadian middle years school. My program is part of the Technology and Applied Arts program in my school division. I hold a Bachelor of Arts with a double major in English literature and film production, a Bachelor of Education, a Post Baccalaureate Diploma in Education, and a Master of Education in Educational Technology and Design.

I began my teaching career in 2009 as a homeroom core subject grade 7 teacher and in 2011 I became a middle years multimedia and technology teacher. I teach students in grade 6, 7, and 8. Ages range from 10-14. I teach my course to 10 groups of students from five different schools. Our school year is split into three terms, and between the 10 classes each term I teach approximately 200 students. Students attend my class for 120-160 minutes every school day cycle depending on how much time they require to be transported from their school to my classroom.

There is no government curriculum for my courses other than a Manitoba Education *Literacy with ICT Continuum* (2018) document that is general in nature and expected to be applied throughout all subject areas. My course has been designed as a local option based on the continuum document and learning outcomes from similar courses offered in high school. The content is broken down into areas that include photography, video production, computers, and audio production. There is an emphasis on skills related to communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem solving. My classroom features desks, 20 computers, and a variety of audio/visual equipment. My general approach to teaching a class is to teach a set of multimedia production skills (camera use, storyboarding, video editing, etc) then have students begin an independent group production project (film, podcast, poster, etc).

My students come from a diverse set of social-economic and ethnic backgrounds. The students typically reside in North West Winnipeg. Some students come from more affluent neighbourhoods, while others live in poverty. Our school features two programming streams for students which are: Regular English

classrooms and French Immersion classrooms where students typically speak English at home and are expected to learn in French for 80% of the school day. Many students do not speak English as a first language and at home it is common for them to be speaking Punjabi or Tagalog. We also have students who have recently moved to Winnipeg from Northern Manitoba communities.

3. My journey as a teacher and gamer

3.1 First years

"Hey Niall, you play video games right? There are some kids that maybe you can talk to about something going on," is what my principal said to me in my first year of teaching. There was an issue happening at lunch where students were playing football outside, when someone would get knocked down other students were running over and crouching over each other's heads replicating something called "teabagging" that they would do when playing popular first-person shooter video games online when you "killed" another player. The name of this is derived from a sexual act, and there were parents who were complaining. I was the young teacher who knew what was going on having played these games online, so with a veteran teacher, we ended up having a meeting with about 50 students aged 12-14 to discuss this and teach students about respectful behaviours. The students really connected with what we were talking about, and the behaviours outside stopped and we did not have to address this again.

This was very early in my teaching career, but it was the first time that I felt that my own experiences as a gamer were legitimized in school. It was as if I was a bridge between the game literate students, the other teachers, and the parents. Even though my expertise was used to resolve a behavioral issue, it is my first recollection of teaching about how to play and interact in video games.

In late 2011 I changed positions at my school, moving from being a homeroom classroom teacher to a middle years multimedia and technology specialist. There was an emphasis in my school division on teaching the concept of the "Digital Citizenship" defined by Mike Ribble (2017) as "the continuously developing norms of appropriate, responsible, and empowered technology use." I would use video games and their interactions online as examples of this, often talking about my own experiences playing games such as *World of Warcraft* (2004) or *Halo 3* (2007) when teaching about digital safety, appropriate online communication, as well as examples related to the importance of selecting computer input devices for recording. An example that stands out is when I would teach students about setting up microphones and digital audio interfaces, where I would stress the importance of ensuring that the external microphone is selected instead of the webcam microphone, citing a mistake I made in the past, where I accidentally chose my webcam microphone and left it on during a *World of Warcraft* raid and broadcasted a shouting match that I was having with my brother.

I continued this approach for several years using games as a discussion point. I never really played games with my students, other than one instance when I brought in my console for a year end party. It was not until I went back to university, that I really began to think about bringing games into my classroom as a more interactive and situated activity.

3.2 Graduate studies

In 2016 I began my Master of Education in educational technology and design by distance at the University of Saskatchewan. I had the opportunity to research video games in education in one of my first courses by writing a graduate paper on using games as a teacher. Throughout this process, I was able to confront some of the stigmas that I heard growing up.

In addition to some of the arguments raised by Provenzo and Dietz, I came across findings such as those of Anderson et al. (2003) who suggested that research indicates that violence in media such as video games, movies, and television, increases aggression in individuals in the short term and the long term (p.67). As I continued my research, I also found arguments against these perspectives. One example is the work of Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca (2008) who disputed some of these claims calling them the "Active Media Perspective," which focuses on behaviourism and experimental psychology. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca suggested that when other factors are considered such as gender and parental involvement, the results in the active media studies are radically different. I found a similar claim in

Ferguson's (2007) meta analysis of video game studies, that found that playing violent games "does not appear to be associated with negative effects in relation to aggressive behavior" (p.314).

Within the research and literature, there were also numerous suggestions about the benefits of playing games such as Granic, Lobels, and Engels (2014), suggestions that video games develop a variety of skills in its players. This includes cognitive skills through first person shooter games, problem solving skills through strategy games, and prosocial skills through games that require teamwork, cooperation, and social interactions. In addition to the benefits of playing games, I found strategies for parents and caregivers from teachers, speech and language teachers, and educational psychologists (Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2014) which included advice for caregivers in regards to gaming. In their order of most recommended to least recommended these were: constructive use, restriction, laissez faire, and prohibition.

By building upon my research and connecting to my own experiences, I now believed that I could justify the use of games within my school to students, caregivers, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders. I now had the experience and the education to address concerns raised in some of the literature regarding aggression and negative messages, while making the connection between research, theory, and my own teaching practice. My goal now was to find meaningful ways to implement games in my classroom and context by connecting them to my content area and by using them to help build the school community.

4. Implementation

4.1 Classroom

In my context, teaching multimedia and technology classes involves the creation of student projects including podcasts, videos, webpages, and other products, while having opportunities to discuss and learn about media literacy, digital literacy, and other technology and communications related topics. I always had students who played lots of video games and liked watching streams and gameplay videos online. There seemed to be a natural connection to be made here by finding ways for students to connect their school projects and activities to their interest in games which I thought could help with motivation and engagement.

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I was already letting students make podcasts and videos about games if they asked me, but I was now starting to encourage it by telling them to choose topics that they were passionate about, citing the example of video games. An example would be a suggestion that I made for students to plan out a podcast to talk about games or another topic of their choosing. I used the suggestions of Durkin and Conti-Ramsden and my own experiences to support my students where I could. My guidelines for students were to talk about the games critically, with the emphasis on the good, the bad, and if there were any concerns about content especially if it were violent or included stereotypes or prejudices. This also became a language and literacy activity for many of my students. There were many who were learning English as an additional language and there were those that had independent learning goals related to reading and speaking. Occasionally there would also be students from our school's French Immersion program who would also do their projects in French. Students would typically write a script at their own level, then practice reading it aloud several times before recording. Video games were a topic of interest for many of these students, thus there was a high level of motivation and a great deal of their own background knowledge that they could draw upon.

I also suggested that my students create gameplay videos in class as a short video documentary where they would plan out a script and storyboard. I would teach them how to record gameplay videos with capture devices, microphones, and cameras. This was equipment that I had readily available in my classroom that I had purchased for the school with my program budget (See Appendix 1). With students capturing video and playing games in class, helping students manage their time effectively was important. This included frequent conversations about the amount of time they would play while recording videos and setting a schedule for project work during individual class periods. Students recorded videos of games such as

Fortnite, *Minecraft*, and *League of Legends*. Again, this provided language development opportunities and practice for many of my learners in a similar fashion to the podcast project described above.

> *There were many who were learning English as an additional language and there were those that had independent learning goals related to reading and speaking. They were able to write up a podcast script at their own level, then practice reading it aloud several times before recording.*

4.2 Video game club

In early 2017, for a school professional development day we had an EdCamp, where teachers can bring in their own topics for presentations and discussions. Being immersed in my graduate work on video games, I brought this in as a discussion. Several other teachers attended and we all shared our perspectives. With two teachers who worked at my school, we developed a plan for a lunch time club. We decided that our club would focus on giving students a place to socialize and play games at school while giving us an opportunity to teach about healthy gameplay habits and digital citizenship. We approached our school administration with this proposal and were given the go ahead to start.

As teachers we brought in our old game consoles from home and some older consoles that were sitting around in our school. We ran the club one lunch hour a week. We set up club rules and expectations about sharing, allowing everyone to play, positive non toxic attitudes, and being supportive. We had students playing older games such as *Super Mario World* (1990) as well as newer titles such as *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* (2018) We decided that we would not allow first-person shooter video games and we were also avoiding third-person shooters such as *Fortnite* (2017). We were concerned about the level of violence in some games and decided as a group of teachers that we would avoid games that were primarily shooters, featured graphic content, or were games that students were not old enough to purchase themselves. We discussed this with our administrators and they supported this decision as they also expressed uncertainty about violent games. The decision was made that we wanted to focus on what we thought was enjoyable and social gameplay.

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We started the club and were overwhelmed with our turnout. We had about sixty students show up in a classroom that could comfortably hold about twenty-five. Student reactions were very positive, there were requests to play some of the more violent games, but when we explained why we made our choices, they acknowledged that they understood. It was chaotic, but there were lots of positive interactions, and many students approached us about taking on leadership roles.

Everyday at school, I now had students talking to me about the club. Through conversation with them we decided that some of our older students would organize play rotations, set up the gaming consoles and projectors, make school announcements regarding the club, and organize gaming tournaments.
There were students who created leader boards for wins in games, students were going class to class making short presentations about the positive messages we were trying to send, and we had students asking to bring in their own equipment and games to share with one another. Enthusiasm was high and we felt that we had created a strong community of gamers in our school.

There were many teaching moments that existed in our regular club sessions. Sometimes I noticed that our younger or less outgoing students would not be getting a fair chance to play, so I would frequently pause everyone to have a conversation to make sure that everyone would get a turn. Eventually I did not have to continue having this conversation as the students learned and began doing this on their own. Sometimes there were issues with inappropriate language being used which prompted small group discussions about keeping the conversations positive and constructive. It was also common for us to have conversations

about what to do if a game was making you angry or stressed, where we could focus on strategies to calm down and when to identify that you needed to take a break.

Eventually we had a group of students excited about a new version of the *Super Smash Bros.* game coming out in late 2018. As a club we had heard about a Nintendo of Canada video contest to win a new console and decided upon submitting a video. I had students work in my class to plan, record, and edit a video. We ended up submitting it and won one of the console packages through Twitter (See Appendix 2). When our students heard the news, they were ecstatic and really felt empowered.

Image 1 *A screen capture from our Video Game Club Nintendo of Canada contest video*

As the 2018-2019 school year drew to a close, we had some staffing changes which impacted the available space and staff for the club. In September 2019, I became the sole teacher running the club, which I renamed to Esports club as I wanted to put an emphasis on teamwork, communication, and healthy lifestyles by connecting it to the sports branding. A few changes that I made included mini lessons on topics such as use of language when playing, screentime, and non-toxic gaming behaviour. I developed structured gaming tournaments as school events and looked for opportunities to compete against other schools. The local school tournaments worked well, but there were challenges participating against other schools both in person and online due to the distance of tournament locations and online connectivity restrictions with our school network.

5. Reflection

5.1 Classroom reflection

Bringing video games into my school and teaching context has helped me as a teacher connect to my students and help them bring something from their personal life into their education. When I allow students to use games as project topics, they can draw upon their experiences and make connections between their hobbies and academics. Students become knowledge holders and teachers can also become learners. I try to draw upon my own experiences learning about the research and theory behind the educational uses of

games. I try to teach this to my students through one on one conversations and group discussions. In my opinion, it legitimizes their passions and gives them a topic that they can feel comfortable and excited to present.

As a teacher, I have had to be careful at times with playing games in class, as students can often play "too much" and lose focus on the rest of their project. Frequent check-ins are important and I have had to remind students to keep on track with their project progress and limit their time recording gameplay or researching games. I usually get students to "chunk" their work into fifteen minute blocks to help them keep on track and transition from one activity to the next.

> ◣◿▣ **TEACHING TIP**
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I do question at times whether I should be forcing more serious topics on my students such as global warming or social issues. Sometimes I encourage this choice, but at other times I have felt that it is important to let students make a choice based on their own interest to ensure that they are presenting on something positive. Classroom topics do not always need to be "fun" but they can't be overly serious all the time especially when we want students to be passionate and engaged with their learning. There is a balance here that can be difficult to achieve and ties into many factors including school planning, curriculum, contexts, learner needs, and more, which could be the topic of a future paper.

5.2 Video game club reflection

The school gaming club is a social hub for students. I have watched as friendships have been formed and students have been able to become leaders in an interest area that has not always been emphasized by schools. My administrators have frequently brought new students who may not have many social connections, and they have made friends through the club while learning about positive behavior, well-being, and digital citizenship.

> *I have watched as friendships have been formed and students have been able to become leaders in an interest area that has not always been emphasized by schools.*

I always have students wanting to bring in new games, and I need to find a balance between incorporating student interests as well as ensuring games fit my criteria of engaging and social gameplay while not having a level of violence we deem inappropriate. This has always been a teacher judgement call where we have usually identified blood, use of firearms, graphic or mature content, and excessive physical violence as the criteria for not allowing a game. This becomes challenging at times as even games such as *Super Smash Bros. Ultimate* contains some of this content. What has resulted is that the criteria for games is not always clear or explicit which can be problematic. I have made decisions by playing the game myself, reading online reviews from sites that feature parental opinions, by discussing the game with students, looking at the age ratings on the game, and if there are still questions I will have a discussion with my school administrator to get their thoughts. If there are student questions in this regard, I will explain my decision making and I am always open to hearing their perspectives and revising my choices if needed.

There have been some challenges with our club. Despite an overall positive reaction from students and families, some students have expressed worries about what their parents think of them joining a school

video game club. Although the students value playing video games, sometimes their parents do not see it as a healthy activity for them. I have sent a letter home explaining the club (See Appendix 3), and have made myself available for questions, comments, or conversations. When we have parent and student conferences, I get a lot of positive feedback. However, there has been little follow up from parents who do not see value in what we are doing.

Another challenge has been in the participation in competitions between schools. Due to the distance and time of tournaments and events, there has not been enough students who have been able to participate. Online events have also been difficult due to restrictions on the school's internet portal which has been a common issue with other teachers and schools that I have spoken to. My workaround has been to run local school only tournaments.

6. Conclusion

Video games have been part of my life for a long time, and over my experience as a teacher they have become increasingly present in my educational context. As my own teaching practice and career have developed, I have versed myself on the research and literature surrounding games and infused them within my classroom and school. This took time, experience, and my own personal learning, and represents a narrative of my own teaching practice and decision making. There are still some challenges and questions that are present, but in my opinion video games in school is still an untapped area of potential that has not fully been explored. There is still much to be said about the learning opportunities that they can provide for students, teachers, and other educators in many different contexts. Future research should examine best practices regarding the implementation of games in classroom teaching contexts and the decision making of teachers regarding their use.

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Appendix 1: Media Lab Equipment

Equipment available to students for multimedia production projects:
1. DSLR Camera with 3.5mm microphone input
2. Tripod
3. Lavalier microphone
4. USB microphone
5. Digital capture card
6. PC or Mac computer with editing software such as iMovie, Filmora, or Movie Maker

Appendix 2: Nintendo of Canada Contest Video

Nintendo of Canada Contest Video https://twitter.com/LeilaNorthNews/status/1063527721345667072

Appendix 3: Esports Letter

Dear Parent/Guardian

Your student has recently joined the school Esports club. Esports is a form of competition using multiplayer digital games that are played individually or on teams. Esports are played at the amateur, professional, and post secondary level. Recently, universities have begun Esports programs and have offered Esports scholarships to students.

Esports provides students with the opportunity to be part of a school team, develop life skills, teamwork, responsibility, positive attitudes, and more. In addition, students can learn information technology and communication skills relevant to 21st century education.

Students who are members of the club are expected to support others, maintain positive attitudes, and participate in a healthy lifestyle. Parents/guardians are recommended to monitor student screen-time and encourage students to stay active.

As members of the club, students have the opportunity to attend lunch time and occasional after school sessions. Students are expected to represent the school at multiple events throughout the year which will be communicated at a later date.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at the school.

Sincerely,

Mr. Niall McFadyen

Multimedia and Technology Teacher