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Games and literacy: Remixes in asynchronous time

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Key points

- **What is this?** This is a narrative explaining my development of an asynchronous learning activity that used student gameplay as a reflective learning activity targeting media literacy and multiliteracies.
- **Why did you make it?** I made it to share my experiences and resources for other teachers and educators while exploring how video games can be used for literacy instruction.
- **Who is it for?** Teachers, parents, teacher-candidates, students, and researchers.
- **What other resources did you use and adapt?** Jonathan deHaan's Game Terakoya project.

Tweet synopsis

Games and literacy, a teacher narrative about teaching with asynchronous remixes of discussion questions about games.

#edtech #remoteteaching #videogameliteracy #gametolearn

View at the LLP Playground:

<https://www.llpjournal.org/2020/10/25/n-mcfadyen-game-and-literacy-remixes.html>

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1. Introduction

Literacy is an integral part of school learning. Typically schools teach literacy through books, writing assignments, instructional applications, and more. In my experience as an educator and as a student, video games are not often discussed or used when we teach literacy. However, when you look closely at many different games, you find that they are filled with words, pictures, symbols, and more that need to be read and interpreted to fully understand and integrate yourself into the game. Games themselves are complex interactive environments and as Squire (2008) suggests, they are multimodal and pragmatic through their integration of texts, graphics, and sound, and there are gaming literacy practices that are unique as games are spaces to inhabit, learning becomes a productive and performative act, and participation requires producing and consuming media. My students play games, frequently talk about them with their peers, and watch a variety of different types of gaming videos online. While teaching multimedia and technology classes during the period of remote learning between March and June 2020, I wanted to develop a literacy activity that utilized the literary aspects of games. Building on ideas such as media literacy and multiliteracies, the following article explores the narrative of my design and planning choices with the design of a games and literacy-based discussion activity in a multimedia and technology course.

2. Context

2.1 Classroom context

I am a multimedia and technology teacher in a Canadian grades 6 to 8 middle school, where our students attend a homeroom class for core subject areas and attend classes like mine for specialized curriculum areas once or twice every six days. Our school year is split into three terms, where I teach 10 classes a term. 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. Students typically receive somewhere between 20-30 hours of classroom time.

The main course that I teach is middle years multimedia. There is no official government curriculum for it other than a Manitoba Education *Literacy with ICT Continuum* (2018) document that is general and expected to be applied throughout all subject areas. My course has been designed as a local option, based on the continuum document and additional learning outcomes from similar and connected curriculums. The content is broken down into areas that include photography, video production, computers, audio production, and media literacy. There is an emphasis on skills related to communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and problem-solving. Students typically take on multiple projects throughout a term in my class which may include podcasts, short films, or stop motion animations.

In my classroom, I like to lead media-based discussions with my students. Media and digital literacy are common topics that I use to get my students thinking about their habits and activities with media from new perspectives. Students are allowed to view or explore different examples of media and then are prompted with discussion questions to examine issues and their emotional responses. For example, I may show clips from older films such as Georges Méliès *Le Voyage dans la Lune* (1902) and then contrast it with a modern film to explore stylistic and technical shifts in film production. I also will engage students in analysis and discussions on topics such as racism and stereotyping in cinema by looking at clips from films such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) or *Birth of a Nation* (1915). Video games are another topic that I like to explore through asking students questions that include "What qualities make a good video game," "How do violent video games make you feel," and "At what age should kids play violent video games?"

2.2 Media literacy

Media literacy can be defined differently depending on where you look but some commonalities include different skills needed to understand and act in today's media-rich environments. The organization Common Sense Media defines media literacy as "the ability to identify different types of media and understand the messages they're sending," whereas the National Association for Media Literacy Education defines it as "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication." Renee Hobbs (2010) defines media literacy as a set of life skills that include the

ability to make responsible choices, accessing and comprehending information, analyzing messages in a variety of forms, creating content, reflecting on one's conduct and communication, and making use of language, images, sound, and new digital tools and technologies.

My approach to teaching media literacy involves the ongoing integration of various skills and principles. I do not usually teach them as stand-alone topics. Occasionally, I may include a discussion with students about a theory or philosophy such as the work of Marshall McLuhan or something like finding guidelines for reliable websites. This would usually be followed by a chance to reflect on or experience media considering new ideas, a class discussion, and a small assignment or assessment question for follow up. I often like to use video games for a discussion topic, as in my experience they have been underrepresented in educational contexts. Overall, this activity typically took the form of a "mini-lesson," that would often serve as a bridge that students could use to follow up with a larger multimedia project such as a film or podcast.

TEACHING TIP

My approach to teaching media literacy is to not always teach it as a standalone topic but to integrate it into other topics and activities.

2.3 Remote learning

In late March 2020, my school, among many others, transitioned to a remote learning approach. There were several logistical problems as students were scheduled to take courses such as multimedia, woodworking, graphic arts, and cooking, and many of these students would not have had access to everything that they would need while being at home. As a school, we decided that we would combine all of our technology and applied arts classes into one course for each grade level and adopt an open format where students could pick and choose different modules from our courses to complete based on their interests as well as what they had available at home. Every week students had new options from each content area and within a month there were over twenty different weekly activity choices to choose from. We also ran weekly synchronous real-time meetings for the students who could attend and as teachers, we would each put a lesson and activity up every week for students to choose from. The platform that we used was Google Classroom, which features the integration of different Google G-Suite products. In our context, we used Google Drive for sharing files, Google Forms for the creation of small quizzes and assignments, Google Meet for synchronous video conferencing, Google Groups to share staff information, and Google Hangouts for communication with students and staff.

3. Planning

3.1 Intentions and ideas

As remote learning began, I noticed that there were groups of students getting together online to play video games during the school day. This was intriguing, and I began wondering if there was a way that I could connect students' gameplay habits to the remote learning context. I considered adapting my discussion-based media literacy, but I wanted to build upon it by working in and remixing some of my more recent influences in the areas of literacy and games. I did not think that I could continue what I did in my regular classroom, as it did not seem like it would work in this context. I believed that students would be reluctant to participate in a synchronous video conference discussion, as these sessions included students from different homeroom classes, many of whom were unfamiliar with each other. An additional concern was that some of the students who attended did not have an interest in my subject area and were primarily choosing assignments from other teachers and content areas such as human ecology and industrial arts.

I specifically wanted this activity to feel fun and low risk, I did not want it to come across as a high stakes assignment. My goal was to take what I saw as valuable discussions from my classroom and

adapt them to a new asynchronous environment. As students were on different schedules and had different commitments, there was a need to create a space for students to engage in something similar to their typical classroom discussion. I thought about a discussion forum for my students to engage in an exercise of reflecting and sharing on their experiences playing games while practicing media literacy principles, but I was noticing that students were sometimes hesitant to post responses where other people could see. I hoped that students could respond to my questions, develop the skills and principles that I was targeting, and then use their responses as a starting point for a future project.

3.2 Influences

As I was developing this activity, there were multiple perspectives, theories, curriculums, and resources that I wanted to incorporate. I believed that using multiple resources as a starting point would help me develop more multifaceted and interesting activities for students, making them more diverse and dynamic connecting to different areas of student interest and talents. Looking at Jonathan deHaan's literacy work in his Game Terakoya project *Teaching language and literacy with games: What? How? Why?* (2019), I liked how he structured his projects with questions and analysis, so I looked at the resources that he had created and adapted some of them to my context. Building on dehaan's work I also wanted to integrate more theoretical underpinnings including, *A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures* (1996) by the New London Group and Henry Jenkins' emphasis on "new media literacies" and "participatory culture" as outlined in his report *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education in the 21st Century* (2009). I believed that multiliteracies connected to the overall direction of my classes with its argument that "where the textual is also related to the visual, the audio, the spatial, the behavioral" (p.64). Jenkins' work on participatory culture, also connected to a concern that I had, where I noticed that many of my students were primarily consumers of media and not necessarily producers or true participants. By integrating Jenkins' ideas, I was hoping that I would be able to help move students towards more active participation in society and culture.

TEACHING TIP

Integrating different perspectives, theories, and resources can help make activities more diverse, dynamic, interesting, and multifaceted.

3.3 Curriculum

One of the curriculums that have influenced my course is the Manitoba *English Language-Arts Curriculum Framework* (2019). Although my class is not necessarily a traditional language arts program, my courses draw upon the learning outcomes and elements that are included in this curriculum. While planning an assignment on games and media literacy, I specifically targeted grades 6 to 8 elements and bands listed in the curriculum. These were "Interpret and integrate information and ideas from multiple texts and sources," "Contemplate the actions that can be taken, consider alternative viewpoints, and contribute other perspectives," and "learners are exploring their own voices to transform their identities, tell their personal narratives, and critically view their own and others' texts." I chose these elements specifically as one of the learning expectations put forward from our provincial government was that "teacher-directed learning will focus on literacy and numeracy, with opportunities for science and social studies, physical education and health education, and the arts through cross-curricular planning." I purposely chose not to include a media production element that would involve the creation of a project like a video or a podcast. In the context of remote learning, I felt that this could have been overwhelming and not a realistic possibility for many of my students.

3.4 The medium is the message

Often in my classroom activities about video games, I would discuss with students Marshall McLuhan's argument that the medium is the message from his book *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964). I would present some of the ideas of McLuhan including how the form or type of the media can impact how we experience it in different ways than the content. Following this, I would ask questions such as:

- How is playing video games with friends different if your friends are in the same room with you compared to if they are online in their own homes?
- How is playing games different on your phone from your television?
- How do you feel playing games with live voice chat versus games without voice chat?

These questions and discussions would serve to generate ideas and thoughts that students could use later during multimedia production projects where they might be analyzing a media-based topic of their choice, or making creative decisions regarding their projects. This approach had worked well in my classroom as I would guide students through the questions, but for asynchronous learning, I would need to make some changes as I often felt I needed to prompt students and ask follow up questions when discussing this topic.

3.5 Multiliteracies

A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social Futures (1996) by the New London Group and the article *Multiliteracies: New Literacies, New Learning* (2009) by Cope and Kalantzis connected to the direction that I wanted to take. My intent was in line with the multiliteracies goal of critical engagement being central to the discussion questions, with the focus being on a critical reflective examination of game playing through discussion, response, and discourse. I also felt that by using video games, I was following the New London Group's suggestion that learning processes need to recruit the different interests and intentions of learners. I also purposely wanted to build my activities around the theory of multiliteracies pedagogy which included situated practice as immersion in experience, overt instruction through the interpretation of different modes of meaning, critical framing as the interpretation of social and cultural context critically, and finally transformed practice through putting the transformed meaning to work in other contexts. The multiliteracies approach would also allow for alternative forms of engagement in the varied experiences, the different talents and interests, the different perspectives the learner may have, and the different modes and settings in which they may apply or enact their knowledge while allowing for divergent learning orientations (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009).

I felt that by using video games, I was following the New London Group's suggestion that learning processes need to recruit the different interests and intentions of learners.

3.6 New media literacies

Wanting to expand my media literacy content, I saw an opportunity to connect this asynchronous activity with Henry Jenkins' new media literacies as outlined in *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (2009). I agreed with his overall argument that youth benefit from participating in participatory culture and I agreed with the importance of enabling participation by encouraging youths to develop skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence to participate in contemporary culture. As I was developing my activity, I specifically targeted Jenkins' skills including play as the capacity to experiment with surroundings as a form of problem-solving, performance as the ability to adopt identities for improvisation and discovery, negotiation as accessing diverse communities looking at multiple perspectives, and networking as the ability to search, synthesize, and disseminate information. This fit into the analysis and reflection on playing games while also connecting the literacy outcomes that I wanted to target.

I agreed with the importance of enabling participation by encouraging youths to develop skills, knowledge, ethical frameworks, and self-confidence to participate in contemporary culture

3.7 deHaan's Game Terakoya

Being familiar with Jonathan deHaan's work on his *Game Terakoya* project, his approach to teaching literacy with games drawing on multiliteracies proved to be a valuable resource and influence for my planning. Although the overall scope of his project which included learning to play, game-play, an analysis project, and a participatory project, was much larger than what I wanted to do, I felt that I could adapt some of his resources to fit my context. While also considering some of the work I described above, I was looking specifically at deHaan's gameplay debriefing sheet. I found that the questions he used with his students to reflect, respond, and analyze games provided me with a foundation to base some of my questions. I modeled my activity on his debriefing sheet and utilized a couple of his questions on language and game experience before I began integrating the other sources and ideas that I wanted to target.

4. Approach and results

4.1 Google Forms

As remote learning was progressing, I noticed that many of my students liked to complete work when it was set up as small assignments that were easy to submit through something like a Google Form. I decided that I would try to leverage this to increase participation through my discussion questions. Using a combination of questions from dehaan's *Game Terakoya*, some of my previous questions, and new ones that I devised through consideration of Jenkins' work, I developed a Google Form that included instructions (Appendix 1) and questions that students would answer. The instructions focused on having students learn to play a game that was new to them, read online commentary or reviews about the game, think about if they agree with the commentary, have a real-life conversation about the game, and try to participate in the online community. This was important to me as I wanted to connect to deHaan's learning to play process from *Game Terakoya* that connected to literacy and learning new vocabulary. Secondly, I also wanted to have students play a game that had an unknown factor and could serve as a new experience. In addition to providing asynchronous instruction, I also explained this process in a synchronous real-time video conference. Below are the questions that I used.

TEACHING TIP

In an asynchronous context, many of my students liked to complete work when it was set up as small assignments that were easy to submit through something like a Google Form.

4.2 Questions

The questions (Appendix 2) that I wanted students to respond to needed to be diverse speaking to notions of identity, previous experience, language, learning, feelings, emotions, problem-solving, and more. Below are the questions that I used as well as why I thought they were important, what they were targeting and what they were influenced by.

1. *What did you have to do to learn how to play the game? Were you able to just pick it up and play or did you need to look at any additional content? Did any of your previous experiences (with books, games, movies or anything else) help you play this game?* I wanted to start by having students reflect on the learning process of playing the game, thinking specifically at how they learned to play. It was important to me that students were able to reflect in a metacognitive way about their experience to push their thinking past the immediate level of gameplay.
2. *Was any of the language in the game new to you? List any new words that you had never heard before or were being used in a new way?* As there was a focus on literacy with this activity, focusing on language was important. I adapted this question from [deHaan's Game Terakoya](#) work, as I felt that it addressed the literacy aspect that I was targeting.
3. *How did the game make you feel as you played it?* Similar to one of [deHaan's](#) questions, I was interested in the emotional response of playing the game and for the students to reflect on and become aware of this. From my own experience playing a range of games that can be sometimes frustrating or anger-inducing on one hand, to on the other hand playing games that can sometimes be relaxing. I wanted my students to become aware of this to see how gameplay can affect your feelings and emotions.
4. *Were there any problems, challenges, or obstacles that you had to overcome while you played? Did you have to multitask or search for information inside or outside the game? Please explain your experience.* Multitasking, transmedia navigation, and networking are three of the new media literacy skills identified by [Jenkins](#). They focus on scanning the environment for details, following the flow of stories and information over multiple modalities, and searching for information to synthesize and disseminate. I wanted to address these skills in this question as an exercise in reflecting on the process of learning to play a game and its connections outside of the game world.
5. *What kind of role did you have in the game? Was this predetermined for you, or did you make choices in the game that defined who you were? How was this identity similar or different to who you are?* Again drawing on [Jenkins](#), this question was designed to target his skills of play and performance in a reflective thinking exercise.
6. *What connections or comparisons can you make (to other games/media, to your own experiences, etc)?* This question was similar to one that [deHaan](#) used in [Game Terakoya](#). [deHaan's](#) question felt important to me, as, in my own experiences with different forms of media, I often find myself connecting or comparing one work to another for either a deeper understanding of a critical perspective. For example, having read the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy and *The Hobbit*, I can compare other pieces of fantasy fiction critically, sometimes finding the recycling of Tolkien's ideas or traditional stories. Another example is having seen the Marvel cinematic movies and comparing their portrayals of characters such as Thor, Loki, and Odin, to a video game such as *God of War* (2018), as the latter game utilizes our pre-existing ideas of these characters to subvert our expectations and question our ideas and perceptions of gods and heroes. I also thought that this question connected to the multimodality emphasized in [multiliteracies](#), as it could allow students to draw connections across different modes, forms, and types of media.
7. *Did the game have any problems? How could it be improved or changed?* Similar to one of [deHaan's](#) questions, I chose this as I wanted to have students put themselves in the role of the game designer for a moment. This seemed like a way that students could think and evaluate the game from the perspective of a designer.
8. *Did you agree or disagree with the comments about the game that you read online?* Question 8 connected to [Jenkins' new media literacy](#) skill of judgment, which is the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different sources. I didn't use this question in a way to evaluate truthful or fake information, but rather for students to develop their opinions. There are many gaming review sites online and there have been ongoing debates regarding critics versus crowd-sourced reviews.

I also suggested to students to possibly post their review on a review site open to the public. This was done to encourage students to participate in the community surrounding the game.

4.3 Discussion, limitations, and reflections

This was the first time that I attempted these questions and this activity with my students. In their submitted responses, students reflected on playing different games including first-person shooters including versions of *Rainbow 6* and *Call of Duty*, an independent tribute game in *Super Mario Dolor*, a game made in *Roblox* called *Jailbreak*, action role-playing games *Hyper Light Drifter* and *Minecraft Dungeons*, as well as other games including *Paladins* and *Mario Kart*. It is not uncommon for me to see students talking or writing about video games, however, what was unique in this context was that they were reflecting on the actual learning to play and gameplay experiences. They expressed that they were able to pick up and learn to play the games through in-game tutorials, written instructions while drawing on their previous experience playing similar games. A common response was that watching tutorial videos on Youtube was of help while learning to play.

Within the responses, there were connections to the multiliteracies and new media literacies that I had targeted such as situated practice, critical framing, performance, and sense of identity. It was not uncommon for students to offer critical perspectives on gaming communities, to indicate that they felt a variety of emotions while they played different games, and to indicate that they played roles different from their personalities in various games. As a teacher, this shows me that there is potential to connect video games to literacy instruction and that an approach that utilizes multiliteracies and new media literacies can lead to students reflecting and examining games as a type of situated text which would not necessarily be possible with traditional books and media. The questions and student responses showed promise and connected to the targeted learning outcomes. As a teacher, I see the potential to connect these to larger projects and activities in the future. This learning could also be extended to analyzing or participating in gaming communities, which from my experience, is something not commonly done in traditional schools. Within my teaching practice, these are elements that I can begin exploring further and write about in the future.

I had originally hoped to have follow up conversation with students to explore their answers further, however, due to the unique circumstances of remote learning and a partial return to small group in-person instruction, I was not able to follow up with most students who completed the activity. Ideally, I would have been able to have students further reflect on and explore their gameplay experiences which could have transitioned into a media production project. Although I felt that this activity represented a successful first attempt or playtests, the full scope was limited in nature and has provided me with an activity that I can revisit and build upon for the future.

With in-person classroom learning resuming, there is an opportunity to provide lessons and activities for students to communicate their learning through games. These questions could serve as a basis for different activities, assignments, or even a starting point for a future learning opportunity in my classroom or an online context. There is also the potential to connect these to larger projects and activities such as the multimedia production projects that I usually incorporate in my courses. By building on these questions they could serve similarly to deHaan's debriefing questions, which could then transition into media literacy analysis and participation activities similar to the *Game Terakoya* project. Within a remote or distance learning context, they could be built into a media literacy unit, or in a blended in-person and online classroom environment, it would be easier to follow up with students for a project-based activity such as a short video or podcast.

Student feedback and experience with game-based media literacy discussion questions were positive. Their responses illustrated critical framing, situated practice, and sense of identity.

5. Conclusion

In this article, I have explored the development of a literacy-based learning activity for middle school students that utilized parts of Jonathan deHaan's *Game Terakoya* project and encouraged students to play games and reflect on them using multiliteracies and new media literacies. To me, it is apparent that my students like to play and talk about video games, and that video games can be used as a medium to teach literacy skills and outcomes. New media literacies and multiliteracies represent valid approaches for the integration of video games into literacy programs, and the *Game Terakoya* framework is a well structured and appropriate approach that teachers can adapt and use in their classrooms. Playing games in class and as part of the school experience, can be an engaging and powerful activity for students. However, more work and experience are needed for educators to fully realize the potential of games and develop lessons, activities, assignments, and school cultures that legitimize and utilize them in meaningful ways. Future considerations include building activities with games into larger projects, units, and learning opportunities that fit into current learning contexts while finding ways to allow learners to bring in their interests and hobbies into the classroom whether it is in person face to face or online in either synchronous or asynchronous classrooms. I hope that by writing and sharing this article that I encourage other teachers to bring games into their classrooms both online and in-person and share their narratives of practice and pedagogy

Students like to play and talk about video games,
and they can be used as a medium to teach
literacy skills and outcomes.

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Appendix 1: Game Analysis Instructions

Choose a game that is of interest to you. Try to pick something new that you have never played before. It can be a video game, a board game, a card game, or a role-playing game. It would be great to choose something that is new to you.

Learn the game. This might include playing through a tutorial for a video game, watching a how to play video, or reading the instructions if it is a board game.

Play the game. Spend about an hour playing the game. Don't think just play. You will reflect on your experience later.

Go online and do some additional research on the game by reading what other people are saying about it.

If it is a board game go to www.boardgamegeek.com and search for your game. Navigate to the discussion forums and read some reviews or commentary.

If it is a video game go to a site like www.metacritic.com and read some user and critics reviews.

Play the game again and think about what you read. Do you agree with other players or do you have your own opinions?

Try to participate in the game community. This could include scoring the game on a review site, creating new content, posting strategies. This is up to you and is only a suggestion.

Have a conversation with a friend or family member about the game. Explain to them what it is and ask if they have ever played it.

Answer the reflection questions that I have posted in the Google Form.

Appendix 2: Game-Analysis Questions

What did you have to do to learn how to play the game? Were you able to just pick it up and play or did you need to look at any additional content? Did any of your previous experiences (with books, games, movies or anything else) help you play this game? *

Your answer

Was any of the language in the game new to you? List any new words that you had never heard before or were being used in a new way. *

Your answer

How did the game make you feel as you played it? *

Your answer

Were there any problems, challenges, or obstacles that you had to overcome while you played? Did you have to multitask or search for information inside or outside the game? Please explain your experience. *

Your answer

What kind of role did you have in the game? Was this predetermined for you, or did you make choices in the game that defined who you were? How was this identity similar or different to who you are? *

Your answer

What connections or comparisons can you make (to other games / media, to your own experiences, etc)? *

Your answer

Did the game have any problems? How could it be improved or changed? *

Your answer

Did you agree or disagree with the comments about the game that you read online? *

Strongly disagree

Disagree

Neutral

Agree

Strongly agree

Appendix 3: Additional Resources

Niall McFadyen Game Analysis Living Google Form

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSeznN6nxcWtRS_sQeamnGwgNvXD4dw0duVdJTCmxCiVv1Nkvg/viewform