Video Games in the Secondary Language Arts Classroom: Opportunities For Deeper Learning and Worldly Discussions

Karissa Thomson
VIDEO GAMES IN THE SECONDARY LANGUAGE ARTS CLASSROOM:
OPPORTUNITIES FOR DEEPER LEARNING AND WORLDLY DISCUSSIONS

By

Karissa Ann Thomson

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Teaching

Hamline University

St. Paul, Minnesota

August, 2020

Capstone Project Facilitator: Melissa Erickson
Content Expert: Jen England
Peer Reviewer: Courtney Kjoberg
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## CHAPTER ONE: Introduction to the Capstone

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 5
- Research Question ......................................................................................................... 5
- Rationale and Context .................................................................................................... 5
- Summary ....................................................................................................................... 10

## CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

- Overview ....................................................................................................................... 12
- A Brief History of Video Games and Conversations ...................................................... 12
- Positive Impacts of Video Games .................................................................................. 14
- Negative Impacts of Video Games ............................................................................... 19
- Genres of Games .......................................................................................................... 21
- Current Standards ........................................................................................................ 24
- Worldly Discussions .................................................................................................... 25
- Connections ................................................................................................................ 27
- Summary ....................................................................................................................... 28

## CHAPTER THREE: Project Description

- Project Description ....................................................................................................... 30

## CHAPTER FOUR: Conclusion

- Introduction .................................................................................................................. 35
- The Journey .................................................................................................................. 36
- Strengths ....................................................................................................................... 38
CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction to the Capstone

Introduction

My senior year of undergraduate studies at Hamline University, I was required to take a special topics class to fulfill a requirement of my English major, which was co-majored with Education. Call it ignorance or any other name, but going into class the first day, I did not know the theme or title of my special topics class. On syllabus day, I realized that the special topics course was in fact a class that focused on how video games are examples of literary, cultural, and historical artifacts. This class completely broadened my perspective on teaching tools, and opened my mind to the forgotten world of video games and how they can be one of the most influential and applicable teaching tools in the entire world of education. Discovering the positive effects of gaming in the classroom struck a passion in me that I have carried throughout the rest of my baccalaureate program and into my masters program. It led me to pursue research and to develop a project for my masters capstone, which resulted in the development of my research question, asking how can video games be used in educational settings to support student curriculum and foster worldly discussions?

In chapter one of my capstone project, you will hear more in depth about the journey that brought me to my question and why incorporating video games into the classroom is so important to me both personally and professionally. You will see how my research question has developed over time and based on the available research. I will also define the stakeholders and their relationships with my topic.
Rationale and Context

As I touched on in the first few paragraphs, my interest in using video games in the classroom stemmed from a special topics class I took towards the end of my undergraduate studies, examining how video games are examples of cultural, historical, and literary artifacts. As a previous and current avid gamer, I was originally excited at the thought of having to play video games as homework. I saw the class at face value and did not have an educational-based lens focused at this time. As the class continued, I was exposed to hands-on gaming, playing games that were not just mainstream glorified games, but most that were educational or provided a worldly and social dialogue about current events or elongated world problems. One of the most influential games I played during my time in that class was an online game called Papers, please. In that game, you play as a border agent controlling who enters a fictitious country that uses images and symbols that mimic those of Russia and Ukraine. As the game progresses, the government issues more rules that people must follow in order to be accepted into the country, and the levels get harder and are always timed as you must let in or deny as many people as you can to make the minimum government issued wage. With the immigration crisis and inhumane conditions of border control in the U.S., the game felt relatable and offered a deeper look into a simulation that represented similar worldly problems. It was games like these we played in class that pushed me to look at how video games can initiate societal discussions and help us understand the things our teachers want us to take away or learn from.
After this class concluded, I took another class titled *Critical Mass Media* my final semester of undergraduate studies. During this class, we examined different theories about how information is projected to society by the media, and how it is absorbed. We had a final project where we could decide what we wanted to present on, as long as we used a theory from class. With my passion for video games still present, I chose to present mine on video games, focusing on the conversation surrounding video games being cathartic rather than catalytic, which were two theories from class. My project examined my belief that video games are more *cathartic* than catalytic. Believing that gaming is cathartic means that playing a game allows the player to learn, act, perform, and try things out in a safe space where there are no real world repercussions. This would include things that players would not want to try or do in real life, referencing violent video games or roleplaying as different characters outside their norm. Contrary to my beliefs, some groups around the world think that gaming is catalytic, meaning that gaming causes violence or acts as a catalyst towards violent or destructive behavior by the player in the real world, often referencing violent video games causing the player to perform mass shootings. However, a strong point I made stated that video games can be more cathartic and that not all video games are violent, since many focus on pure creationism or simulation. This would include games like *Sims*, *Minecraft*, and *Rollercoaster Tycoon*. Finishing that presentation led to another reason why my professional studies pulled me towards advocating for the use of games in the classroom, which was the fact that there is a stigma around young people playing video games and a lack of advocacy for using them for educational purposes, and the
acknowledgement that gaming can have incredibly positive effects on students’ skills and education.

As I journeyed through the capstone process, I knew my passion was still burning hot for advocating for the use of video games in the classroom because they can teach us things in a way that no other medium can. Video games can help us develop abilities and practice skills in a safe space, and academically help educators teach and students absorb information and knowledge in an interactive way. My initial research question was “how can video games be used to further students' understanding of both historical and literary content, as well as the required content and canons in a way that is both cathartic and catalytic towards worldly discussion?” With this research question, I found that I was pulling the focus too far away from the classroom and focusing more on catharsis versus being catalytic. While that is an aspect I want to explore in my project, that is not something I feel needs to be one of the primary focuses of my research. That debate will always exist, and I want my project to focus more on convincing educators to explore video games as a classroom tool and how to successfully incorporate it into curriculum in an appropriate way. The next version of my research question took the form of “how can video games be used in educational settings to help students learn and grasp their curriculum and foster worldly discussions?” While this version of my research question hit more of the focuses I wanted to touch on, I didn’t like the wording and felt it would not have a measurable outcome based on what I wanted this capstone to produce. As stated earlier, the official research question I settled on is *how can video games be used in educational settings to support student curriculum and foster worldly discussions?*
This question felt vague enough to explore different possibilities, but specific enough to what I want educators and students to accomplish or use after interacting with my capstone project.

Now that the research question has been established, it is important to acknowledge the different stakeholders that hold weight within the video gaming and educational communities, specifically teachers and educators, administration, students, parents, and media. Assuming that the video gaming industry and educational settings are combined, teachers are one of the largest stakeholders because they are the ones who create (or are in charge of implementing already created) curriculum and choose whether or not they want to incorporate video games into that space. The entire decision to use video games in their classroom lies with them. School specific administrations are another large stakeholder, because depending on the choice of game, console, and school policies, they have the ability to either support or negate a teacher’s request to use video games in their lessons.

Another stakeholder is the students, because whether or not they choose to participate in the lesson or play the specific games is ultimately, entirely up to them. A teacher could encourage a student to participate in a lesson day in and day out, but if the student is not motivated to do so, they ultimately have the choice to not participate and face the academic consequences. The next stakeholder is parents of students. If a student comes home and is working on homework, in our case playing a video game as part of a lesson, the parent could disallow their child playing that game, and inform the teacher they would not be participating. Parents would actually have a lot of sway, because if
they didn’t support the use of gaming in the classroom, they could plead a case to the school’s administration and potentially take things further.

The last stakeholder I will address is the media. We know that the media can highly impact how anything, no matter what it is, is perceived by consumers. A large belief that has been pushed by the media for a long time is that video games cause violence in young people. While there have been countless studies both for and against those points, the media has a large impact on how gaming is received, and can cause riffs in educational settings.

The true purpose of this capstone is to explore elements like media portrayal of gaming, address common misconceptions and beliefs about games, list examples of classroom appropriate games, and create an accessible teacher packet that will provide both parties with a unit plan that will include lesson plans, activities, and assessments that achieve academic standards for Minnesota schools, particularly for teachers and students in grades 10-12

Summary

In summary, I touched on how my final semesters of undergraduate studies broadened my mind and opened possibilities for me to use video games as an educational tool. Since the first special topics class I took about video games, I have presented on the subject, discussed the use of video games as cathartic rather than catalytic, and have and will continue to create discussions surrounding video games to not be focused on solely being violent. I explained how my research question has molded over time, and what my capstone project will encompass as you read further. I have talked about my personal and
professional inspiration for advocating for the use of video games in the classroom, and how my final capstone project will develop. Before I suggest teachers use video games in their classroom, it is important to look at the literature and what is being said about topics related to my cause. In chapter two, we will acknowledge and break down the literature surrounding gaming in the classroom.
CHAPTER TWO:

Literature Review

Overview

As we have explored in chapter one, video games are a fantastic medium that can both help educators teach curriculum and help to develop the young minds we mold. While there have been controversial conversations about the role video games play in the home and the impacts they can have, video games are a gold mine in the classroom that should not be overlooked. Before suggesting teachers use video games in their classrooms, we need to examine why video games are a crucial, supplemental means to educating young people, and how they can not only strengthen skills, but also help students grasp concepts, curriculum, and become motivated to learn more.

In this chapter, the literature I explore will focus on the history of video games and the conversations they have generated, both negative and positive. I will also explore the impacts of video games, examples of games that have had large impacts on young people, specific standards for secondary language arts in Minnesota, teaching philosophies that can intertwine with how video games should be taught, and the impact video games can have on creating worldly discussions amongst players and in society. All of the literature is being examined through my research question, how can video games be used in the classroom to help students grasp their curriculum and foster worldly discussions?

A Brief History of Video Games and Conversations
While video games exploded in the 1980s, video games have actually been around since the 60s. In 1961, the first “interactive computer game” titled Spacewar was created (Kent, 2001). In 1972, the world famous Pong was released, followed by Pac Man, Space Invaders, and Defender released in 1980. By 1981, arcade and video games had exploded into a $5 billion dollar industry, as people played over 75,000 hours worth of games (Kent, 2001). In the early 1990s, Streetfighter II and Doom were released, and in 1993, the first Senate conversation surrounding video game violence began.

If we backtrack to 1993, you may have noticed that the Senate had concerns after Mortal Kombat and Streetfighter were released. Throughout 1993, then-Senator Joe Lieberman led hearings that shifted focus on violence being depicted in video games, specifically Mortal Kombat, claiming that these games “desensitized” players (Hsu, 2018). In response to the conversation Lieberman started about violent video games, rating systems were put in place, which still hold strong to this day. A committee called the Entertainment Software Association was also formed, who still currently checks that games and players are following rules and regulations (Entertainment, 2019).

Why is the history of video games an important component to this capstone? It is important because it is significant to note where the conversation began surrounding video games, and connecting the effect that media plays on the public’s perception of gaming. It will also be important later in this capstone when we discuss consoles and ways to implement video game usage in the classroom. Video games have been around for decades, but games today are far different and more complex; made with new technologies, new psychological strategies, and with deeper stories and literary depth. As
Kangas, Koskinen, and Krofkors state (2016), “the integration of games in teaching is still somewhat an unexplored area of study” and has not been a common topic for study (p. 451). Now that we have a general history and know that video game violence has been a topic of discussion for a long time, we can shift our focus towards two lenses, the positive and negative impacts of video games.

**Positive Impacts of Video Games**

After years of research, it is easily concluded that many people associate video games with violence, often citing examples of violent video games like the *Call of Duty* series or the *Tom Clancy* series. As we have previously tracked, society has scrutinized violent video games in the mainstream media over time, which has placed blanket assumptions of all games, regardless if they are violent or not (Kent, 2001). A myth we need to debunk is that not all video games are violent, and many actually have great benefits and positive impacts on their players. The positive impacts that playing video games can have on a player are numerous, including increased skills and performances that are transferable to real world situations, increased motivation to learn and develop skills in disabled students and students with language barriers (Horowitz, 2019). They can help students and professionals practice important skills in a safe space, and can help students with self identity and expression. Gaming can also allow players to communicate with and learn more about different cultures and perspectives (Utsch, Braganca, Ramos et al., 2017).

The first positive impact playing video games can have is helping gamers develop skills that can transfer to real world situations. Bavelier, Green, and Pouget (2010)
explain that video games, specifically action video games, increase player performances “in an array of sensory, perceptual, and attentional tasks that go well beyond the specifics of game play.” This also includes skills like “reductions in reaction times, improved hand-eye co-ordination and raises [in] players’ self-esteem” (Griffiths, 2002, p. 47). Playing games that specifically sit in the action genre can help improve probabilistic inference, which also strengthens broader skills such as attentional tasks and problem solving (Bavelier, Green, & Pouget, 2010). Games that allow players to choose from choices or include campaigns can help encourage prosocial behavior, and “increase empathy and helping” (Jordan & Romer, 2014, p. 112). Something as simple as the way a video game configures their *HUD*, or heads up display, can improve players’ “visuospatial processing” (Jordan & Romer, 2014, p. 112). Playing video games also has “wide transfer” capabilities, meaning the skills gamers are developing through gameplay can directly translate into other real world environments and situations (Bavelier, Green, & Pouget, 2010). People who play video games are developing skills that are easily transferable to the real world, and can help them develop into more prosocial people.

Another positive impact gaming can have on players is increased motivation to learn and develop skills, sometimes unknowingly. Arena (2015) found video games to be intrinsically motivating and to have a positive effect on players in the classroom. While not all video games may be labelled as educational, many games “provide powerful experiences that are rich in fodder for subsequent instruction” (Arena, 2015, p. 94). When playing a video game, there are many psychological effects occurring in the brain that often produce intrinsic motivation, subconsciously motivating players to push through the
cycle of emotions players may feel during gameplay (Arena, 2015). While gaming, players can feel emotions such as “tension, frustration, disappointment, discouragement, anger, and even boredom” and joy, and still continue to want to play (Arena, 2002, p. 95). This also ties in with the next benefit to playing video games: motivating students with disabilities and language barriers to keep playing and learning in the process.

Using video games in the classroom can positively impact students with both intellectual and social disabilities, as well as students learning new languages. Sometimes cited in specific student IEP or disability plans is to pull the student out of class to receive remedial instruction or individualized support (Marino, Basham, & Beecher, 2011, p. 36). While the student is getting individualized help, they sometimes miss out on classroom activities and opportunities for deeper discussions with classmates (Marino, Basham, & Beecher, 2011). Research indicates that video games “can enhance the education performance of a diverse range of students, including students with LD, English language learners, and students who struggle with reading but have not been identified as having a disability” by allowing students to interact with content in new ways, such as with 3D models or interactive systems (Marino, Basham, & Beecher, 2011, p. 37). For students labelled ELL, the positive effects video games can have are “increased confidence and lowered anxiety about using English” in a low-risk, informal setting (Horowitz, 2019, p. 379). Even though ELL students that are playing video games might be reading, speaking, and writing at lower levels of English, they actively engage with video games despite potential language barriers due to the motivation and the psychology of gameplay.
Using video games in the classroom has a positive and motivational effect on students with disabilities and ELL students.

Another positive impact video games have are allowing both students and professionals of all ages to practice important skills in a safe medium. For students, video games allow them to “engage deeply with complex simulations and to solve problems that they care about” (Arena, 2010, p. 96). An example of this could be seen in the 2012 app, *Angry Birds*. It consisted of players aiming cartoon birds at objects and other animals at different angles and speeds to knock them over. This app was based on a “scientifically accurate physics engine,” which has helped students who have played it learn about “ballistic trajectory,” something they might not be able to learn safely in a setting outside of a game (Arena, 2010, p. 97). As briefly touched on earlier, some games allow students to interact with 3D models of objects or systems they normally wouldn’t be able to interact with, such as a cell inside the human body, or a star in space (Marino, Basham, & Beecher, 2011). Even medical students or health professionals can benefit from video games because they are able to practice surgeries and life-saving techniques in games and simulations. Video games provide a safe place for players to practice and develop skills in ways that may not be possible otherwise.

Video games can also help players from all backgrounds experiment with their personal identity and expressionism. A claim that Horowitz (2019) makes is that “network-based text and voice chat, personal avatars, and goal-based interaction can have [positive effects] on the learning process for ESL students” (p. 380). When a student is able to make their own avatar, they are expressing and sometimes mimicking themselves,
which creates a connection between the student and their character in the game. When the student feels more connected and involved in the game, their motivation increases and they play on even when language in the game is challenging (Horowitz, 2019). For students still exploring their identities that may identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, identity exploration and expression in a safe space is important. Both in the real world and within video games, “gender related representation is growing” and has opened doors for many students struggling with identity issues to envision themselves in a new realm (Utsch, Braganca, Ramos et al., 2017, p. 853). Not only that, but players can often decide, depending on the game, if they want their character to be good or bad, what quests they would like to pursue, and how they want to pursue it (for example, in stealth versus out in the open, or by making different choices with affected outcomes) (Gee, 2006).

Gaming allows players to explore different perspectives and cultures in a safe space, while interacting with others in the game from a broad, open space where they are not defined by any real characteristic, but rather use it to their advantage when they feel necessary (Gee, 2006). Gee (2006) also discusses how being able to communicate with other players in games allows teammates to use their abilities that may stem from diversity to work as a team to accomplish tasks, referencing the game *World of Warcraft*. Interacting with different cultures and perspectives while being able to express ones’ self is an important component to playing video games that can have a positive effect on players.
After examining the literature surrounding video games and their positive effects on players, we have determined that video games can help players develop skills that have transference to other situations and environments. We have found that emotions and motivational psychology can help push players to keep trying after in-game defeats, a great opportunity to capitalize on in classroom settings. We have seen that video games allow players to express themselves and develop skills and characters in a safe space with no repercussions. Lastly, we have found that video games offer opportunities to learn from and utilize gamers from other cultures and perspectives, and can actually enhance and empower students struggling with language barriers. Since it is a common belief that video games equate to violence and negative side effects, it is important to acknowledge the literature surrounding the negative impacts of gaming.

**Negative Impacts of Video Games**

Anderson, Barlett, and Swing (2009) explained that it is important for us to understand that whether an impact is positive or negative depends on the context of each game and player. They used an example that relates to a violent game, stating “ability and willingness to inflict harm on other people is necessary in combat soldiers when they are in combat but is generally not a positive trait in most other people or even in non-combat situations for soldiers” (Anderson, Barlett, & Swing, 2009, p. 378). Through this claim, we can understand that every single game we advocate usage for will have its pros and cons, and the effects will entirely depend on our environment and what situation we are in. The authors go on to talk about different theories that may contribute to both positive and negative outcomes from people playing video games, using such models as the
General Learning Model (GLM) and General Aggression Model (Anderson, Barlett, & Swing, 2009, p. 379).

Anderson, Barlett, and Swing (2009) also explain the GLM to be the belief that “person[al] and situational variables interact to either increase or inhibit various types of learning” (p. 379). They explain that each player brings into their gaming experience specific emotions, experiences, attitudes, and skills, to which playing specific games will either reaffirm those emotions or change them. They also mention another model, named the General Aggression Model (GAM), which explains that media exposure and influences like aggressive movies or video games do not affect a person’s “thoughts, feelings, or physiological arousal” (Anderson, Barlett, & Swing, 2009, p. 379), but rather certain “variables” may cause impacts that would increase negative outcomes and behaviors. Another way to explain this is that violent media will not directly link to negative behaviors or impacts, but will rather increase smaller feelings or ideas that may already be there. However, they also add that prolonged playing of violent video games and consumption of violent material may increase aggression (Anderson, Barlett, & Swing, 2009, p. 379).

The researchers also mention that studies have found that prolonged exposure to violent media or video games can cause increased physiological arousal, which is good for certain life situations, but not for video games, since these symptoms can blow up or spill over into real life situations (Anderson, Barlett, & Swing, 2009, p. 380). These are very valid points worth noting, and an important conversation surrounding the literature of video games and their effects in the classroom.
As we have acknowledged, the literature that supports video games causing negative effects on players focuses on context being an important factor. The skills you learn in video games, specifically violent games, may not be transferable or may strike up arousal that may not transfer practically into different environments or situations. As we continue examining the literature, we shift our focus to the different genres of video games.

Genres of Games

Something that often gets forgotten is that not all video games are violent. Yes, you have your *Call of Duty* series, *Tom Clancy* series, *Mortal Kombat*, *Injustice*, *Doom*, and other games that are violent in nature or by genre, but there are also many games that are not violent and offer a multitude of positive impacts. Different genres of games that will be mentioned in this segment include creationism, academic games, simulation games, roleplay and strategy games, cell phone app games, and violent/action video games.

Creationism, in this case, refers to games where the gameplay is based on the player creating items, architecture, maps, or other designs. There are opportunities to make landscapes or products within the game that allows the user to be creative and innovative within the game space. Two specific games that stick out when speaking about creationism is *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, and the *Sims* games. In *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, you have an allotted, starting financial balance and can create whatever kind of theme park you like, including a scary themed park (think pumpkins and clowns, light on the scare), a space and sci-fi themed park, and more. You choose the type of rides and attractions
you want to place, and it’s your choice where you want to put them. In order to make a successful park (a park where fictitious attendees can easily access and enjoy the items in the park), the player must design their park with attractions, walkways, restrooms, food stands, and more. There is no violence, there is only creation of the park and managing finances.

Another game in the creationism category is the *Sims* franchise, the latest game being *Sims 4* available on both PC and PlayStation 4, released in 2014. The player starts the game by creating a character, to which you can specifically decide how you want your character to look, act, sound like, be like, and do, all the way down to their genes and personality traits. Next, the player then chooses between purchasing a pre-made home or building one from scratch, all the way down to the floor material, lighting, and appliances. Once you are done building, you then live the sim’s life for them, clicking on items and other characters in the game, “telling” your sim what you want them to do. You can always enter “Build Mode” or “Buy Mode,” in which you can continue buying and creating things for your sim and their community. These two games bring up an idea that video games can not only be great learning and teaching tools, but may also be therapeutic, or cathartic in nature for the player, especially games that are creation based. As writer Romriell (2015) lists, there are multiple benefits to playing *Sims*, such as helping kids with autism or social disabilities learn social cues, teaching players how to handle and respond to conflict, and simply helping alleviate stress.

The next genre of games that will be mentioned is simulation games. These are games that allow you to experience a simulation of an event or experience. In this project,
those games will include Sims in live mode; Oregon Trail; Papers, Please; and McDonalds Game. As previously mentioned, Sims is focused on creationism in build and buy mode, but you mainly play in live mode, where you tell your sims what you want them to do. If you’re a 90s baby, you may remember Oregon Trail, a simulation of a family you get to name traveling through westward expansion. In Papers, Please, you are a border agent in a made up country similar to Russia and Ukraine, given specific rules you must abide by when allowing or denying people to cross at the border. You must get through as many people as possible in order to earn your wage at the end of the day and provide for your family. In the McDonalds Game, you are simulating that you are the CEO of McDonalds and must make decisions based on how much money you want to spend on marketing, how you want to maintain your livestock, and so forth. You will eventually struggle with resources, so it is a simulation to see what choices you would make and how long your business would last while attempting to avoid polluting the environment. These games will be discussed more in depth later on.

While there are a lot of roleplay and strategy games we could examine, I am choosing to only look at one, Town of Salem. This is an online PC game that includes 15 players, each with a randomly assigned secret role. There are “mafia” members, who secretly work together to try to kill off the “townies,” a serial killer who works alone and is trying to kill both mafia and townies, and the townies, who are trying to pinpoint and eliminate both the mafia and the serial killer to save the town. Despite sounding gory and violent, it’s actually tame and cartoonish. There is no blood or violent actions player to player, but rather all characters stand in a circle and go back into their houses after each
round. Players must use strategy to work together or against each other while maintaining the secrecy of their roles.

Last but not least, we should look at specific apps that are accessible from your smartphone, iPad, or other pieces of technology often used in schools. Common apps that students and players often use are the FaceApp, Diner Dash, Sudoku, Word Cookies, and Words with Friends. These are lumped into the apps genre and are easy to use, locate, and collaborate with, and can typically be used to enhance curriculum or help the player work on basic skills. There are many different genres of games and the research found from Romriell indicates there are positives to playing games like Sims and other simulation and creationism games.

**Current Standards**

Since this capstone is based on Minnesota, it focuses on current curriculum requirements from the state of Minnesota. The literature around this is very cut and dry, since there are not any known debates surrounding state standards. One thing the literature focuses on is “results rather than means” (Minnesota, 2010, p. 6). In the “Key Design Considerations” of the K-12 academic standards (2010, p. 6), considerations that the state has taken are stated and it continues to state what educators may focus on or think about as they create lessons that adhere to the standards. An important aspect to this section is where it says “Teachers are thus free to provide students with whatever tools and knowledge their professional judgment and experience identify as most helpful for meeting the goals set out in the standards” (Minnesota, 2010, p. 6). This allows leeway for educators to use video games, apps, and other technological tools to help students
accomplish the lesson targets and meet standards. The standards also mention “media literacy” throughout the document as something teachers should be encouraging and focusing on (Minnesota, 2010).

In the state standards, the document talks about what a student who is “college and career ready” would look like, including skills they will have developed if they’ve met all of the standards (2010, p. 9). This page of the document specifically mentions that they would be able to “use technology and digital media strategically and capably,” and “...employ technology thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, viewing, listening, and media literacy and language use” (Minnesota, 2010, p. 9). In essence, all the standards that are required to be met allow for the educator’s discretion as to how they choose to meet or attempt to meet the standards, especially in regards to including technology and media literacy. College and career ready students should also be able to identify that most places they are working in will be “settings in which people from often widely divergent cultures and who represent diverse experiences and perspectives must learn and work together” (Minnesota, 2010). Understanding and being open to other perspectives and diversity are another important focus of the state standards, which can be achieved by the incorporation of video games into curriculum planning. The entire point of incorporating gaming into curriculum is to help students learn skills, but also to spark conversation surrounding topics and themes we encounter often in society.

**Worldly Discussions**

It is clear that having peer and large group discussions in the classroom is an important component to student learning. When we can take what we experienced
through our video game use and have deep conversations about how those games relate to
what we are learning, or better yet what notions or claims the games are making about the
world around us, we are able to create a valuable experience for students. Once students
have had time to reflect on what they experienced, they should be talking about not only
the content of the curriculum, but what perspectives and commentaries the game is
sparking. As Martin and Van Gunten (2002) explain, it is important for students to “make
connections among culturally constructed positions” to reflect on who they are and where
they fit in society, so that they can identify other “positionalities” and perspectives (p.
47). By using video games (specifically games like Papers, Please), we are putting
students in roles where their typical positionality may be challenged, or confirmed. We
need to use reflection and a discussion piece after use, because “failure to do so may
cause them to obscure or negate the importance of another’s position and can lead to
hierarchical assumptions” (Martin & Van Gunten, 2002, p. 47). What exactly was your
role as border agent? What were you in charge of? How did that make you feel? Then,
flip into opposite perspectives. How would it have felt to be rejected or allowed through
as a citizen? It is games like this that will not only support curriculum, but will also help
students maintain focus and motivation and open up discussions about events going on in
the world.

Rudsberg, Ostman and Ostman (2017) discussed that it is absolutely crucial to
student learning that we provide “students with opportunities to take an active part in the
societal debate and to relate their own lives to the community” (p. 710). Their piece talks
about the research they have conducted on peer interaction, and some of their results
“show that students in collaborative groups, engaging in each other’s points of view, were able to construct superior arguments in their own follow-up tasks” (Rudsberg, Ostman, & Ostman, 2017, p. 711). Students are learning more and taking more away from the curriculum when they are able to engage with situations and material that forces them to think about and analyze different perspectives and cultures than their own. A great way to do that is by playing video games that embody those ideas.

**Connections**

Challenging teachers to incorporate video games into their classrooms is seen by some as unorthodox. Some see it as so because the terms “video games” are often shrouded in a dark sheet of presumed encouragement of violence and catastrophic consequence. It was important to me to explain the history of how the negative assumptions came to be and how they developed over time, because understanding history can help us understand why things are the way they are and can help us predict how things may end up in the future. In this case, it showed the link between how early video games may have been intense and unregulated, but are now governed by the ESA and have morphed into different genres, many of which support positive thinking and skill building.

It was also important for me to find literature surrounding having discussions about the world and current events. When I was playing *Papers, Please* in my undergraduate class for the first time, my mind was blown by the fact that this simulation felt close to home with the current friction surrounding immigration in the U.S. I had never thought about what it was like to be rejected entry into a country, nor what it was
like to be the person who chose to reject them, whether the reason was valid or not. When I turned the game off, all I wanted to do was talk about what I had just played with those around me to work out the feelings I had and the real world examples it made me think of. That is why I chose to examine literature surrounding worldly discussions and why the game *Papers, Please* is so important to this capstone and the experience I want both educators and students to have after interacting with my project. If that specific game can make me feel a range of emotions and spark my interest to learn more, I know other games can have that same effect on learners in a secondary English classroom.

**Summary**

As we have seen, there is a lot of literature surrounding video games and the classroom. There is evident research on how video games have evolved from basic goal reaching components, to violent fighting games, academic games, to creationism games and the effects those have had on society, specifically in the Senate and the gaming world with the addition of game rules and regulations and the creation of the ESA. We have looked at the literature that supports both the positive effects and negative effects video games may have on players. While some of the literature supports that violent video games may increase underlying aggressive natures of the player, further research argued that playing video games helps players develop social skills, increase their internal motivation, expose them to different cultures, roles, and perspectives, increase their confidence, and allow players to express themselves and try out new identities and skills in a safe space. We also saw the literature surrounding the idea that the skills players learn in the gaming world often transfer to offline situations and environments. Genres
were categorized using examples, and we examined the research surrounding some of the benefits those games have on players.

Lastly, we reviewed some of the main focuses the Minnesota state standards has for secondary language arts students, which included focuses on media literacy and learning from diverse backgrounds. The standards talked about the importance of the results and not necessarily the means to achieving those results. College and career ready students are able to identify that most work spaces are settings that include new and upcoming technology, and are capable of being literate within the media and technology aspect. We also touched on the importance of having worldly discussions within the classroom, and how one example of a video game can increase student understanding of perspective and the world around them.

We have now located the relevant literature and saw what the different components had to say about these themes. In chapter three, we will see how the research question *How can video games be used in educational settings to support student curriculum and foster worldly discussions?* will be embodied through a description of the project. We will see how using video games in the classroom will fit together, what that will look like, and how to create lessons that incorporate these items.
CHAPTER THREE:

Project Description

Project Description

As we have seen in chapter one, using video games in the classroom has been a passion of mine since my undergraduate studies. As we saw in chapter two, there is a lot of literature that discussed the use of video games in schools, and the benefits they can provide for players and young people. In this chapter, we look at more of the specifics of this project and how it will benefit students and educators, while still keeping in mind the research question, *How can video games be used in educational settings to support student curriculum and foster worldly discussions?* We will discuss who the intended audience is, the intended demographics for which this project is figuratively based, the research that supports the project, the timeline for completion, and the overall idea and embodiment for this project.

The entire point of this project is to create a packet for educators to use in order to incorporate video games into the classroom. When I was student teaching the spring of 2019, my cooperating teacher created a unit based on the *Frontline* documentary surrounding brain injuries in former NFL players, titled *League of Denial*. It was a unit that was pre-designed, with both a packet for the educator to use and a student packet for students to follow along with, answer questions, and supplementary articles for them to read. The unit was laid out clearly and many of the assignments and articles within the student packet were intertwined with the documentary, time stamps and all. While I am not basing my project solely on the *League of Denial* packet, I loosely used that as a
reference point as to what I wanted my end product to look like. I created a packet for secondary language arts teachers consisting of a four-lesson unit focusing on achieving Minnesota state standards through the gameplay of the PC game *Papers, Please*. The packet includes the four lessons, the standards they would meet, and handouts including scaffolding, assessments, discussion questions and activities. My main goal was to increase the likelihood of educators to use video games in the classroom by creating a pre-made, detailed, mini unit for them to use including the explanations on how to use them. By demonstrating a finished product, educators would only need to make sure they have the required materials for the lesson in order to use.

The audience of my project are teachers and students in secondary English classrooms, specifically in grades 11-12. The reason I have chosen this age group is because the video game I want to focus on are best suited for an older student audience. The good news about video games is that there are so many games designed for all different ages, so it would be easy to find video games for all grades, but for this project I will focus on *Papers, Please*, which I believe is best suited for upperclassmen in high schools. These students would be a good audience specifically for this game because they are old enough and mature enough to understand the events and controversial worldly discussions happening in the United States and all around the world surrounding border control and immigration. This game could be incorporated into the curriculum for younger students, but would require different scaffolding and assignments, which is why the focus will remain on grades 11-12. The teacher packet will be designed to include and touch on standards for English Language Arts grades 11-12.
When I created this project, I pictured the project being used in a setting similar to an urban high school in Minnesota with about 1600 student enrollment. The specific school I pictured had 78 teachers, with a 21:1 student to teacher ratio (United, 2018). The community in which the school resides is composed of about 7000 residents, with a population where 85.7% of households have a computer and 80% of those households have internet subscriptions. 77% of the population is white, while 4.9% are African American, 7.7% are of Asian decent, and 6.9% are Hispanic. The average annual household income is about $57,582 and 22% of the population is under the age of 18 (United, 2018).

When crafting this project together, the literature from chapter two was incorporated, mostly focusing on the work of Arena as a basis. Supported by Gee’s (2006) research, Arena (2015) claims “games can actually provide a model for great learning environments,” stating that with every video game, the player must learn how to play, learn the boundaries, and push the boundaries to see how far they can go (p. 95). Arena also references the zone of proximal development, which most educators are familiar with, talking about how video games’ abilities to locate a player’s skill level and work to maintain their interest while consistently challenging their skill level work together (2015, p. 95). Arena (2015) also talks about how there is a fine balance to incorporating video games that keep students engaged and intrinsically motivated, while using educational games, which is why I actually planned to stay away from purely educational video games for this project. In younger ages, there are video games specifically designed for educational development, such as Reader Rabbit and ABC
Mouse. What I wanted to do here is use more mainstream video games and some that may be off people’s radars, and use them in a way that can foster discussions and help students make connections to current events and the world around them. Arena’s work and Gee’s work guided my creation of the curriculum and packet this project became.

During the creation of this project, it was important to consider what steps needed to be taken in what amount of time to ensure the project develops successfully. My first focus was on choosing specific standards that grades 11-12 would need to target in the curriculum. The next thing I focused on was important events and conversations going on in the world around us that could have a positive and life changing effect on these students. I then developed a unit curriculum, including lessons and handouts, that embodied those ideas, and shortly after decided on using the game I thought would have the most correlation and impact I wanted students to have, which was Papers, Please. I then needed to create assignments and activities that pulled all the previous components together. Lastly, I needed to make sure I had assessments and transitions that make sense for what the unit is trying to accomplish, ending with directions for educators on how to use these tools and the unit to guide further instruction using video games. Those are ideas and components that I completed in order to successfully create the project I envisioned.

The reason this project takes the form of a packet and unit construction is because it is what made the most sense. With the time and resources available to myself, I did not see this becoming a year long plan for curriculum, though that possibility can absolutely exist with further study and planning. I also did not want to focus on creating a “video
game unit,” since I believe video games can be used throughout the year with the right approaches and scaffolding. As I mentioned previously, based on my experience with the *League of Denial* packet, I found that using a short unit and packet idea made the most sense with what I was looking to accomplish. I wanted to plan a unit that used Papers, Please to support the English Language Arts curriculum and standards. While this is one small unit, I want educators to not only see my packet as a way to solely fulfill a media or technology standard, but to also see the bigger picture of the rest of the curriculum, using other games they find to enhance and scaffold their own future units. That is how the project has come to fruition, and why I chose to create a project that embodied a teaching packet for educators.

As we close on chapter three, we now have an idea of what the project looks like. It takes the form of a packet based on a unit I have created for educators to use in a language arts classroom teaching grades 11 and 12. This made the most sense with what I was trying to accomplish, and will provide students and teachers excellent opportunities to reflect on current events, perspectives, and scaffold the curriculum being taught. I based my project on research, specifically that of Arena and that of Gee, which talks about how using video games in the classroom can be beneficial in creating a productive and fruitful learning environment. As we move into chapter four, we will be examining the process my capstone has journeyed through and the transformations my research question and pieces of my project have experienced.
CHAPTER FOUR:

Conclusion

Introduction

Video games have a way of reaching students in a way that traditional instruction and textbooks cannot. They provide a way for students to physically, visually, and emotionally interact with content while developing important reading, social, and situational skills that can be applied to reality. As discussed in chapter one, my passion for incorporating video games into the secondary language arts classroom stemmed from an undergraduate course I took towards the end of my bachelors program. It has driven my graduate studies to follow the potential that playing video games in the classroom can spark conversations about society and the world around us. In chapter two, I examined the literature surrounding the topic of video games and how they can be seen as negative and positive. I also examined the history of how video games came to be prominent in society. In chapter three, I provided a description of my project, which is a short unit in the form of a packet for teachers to incorporate into their classroom.

Throughout my entire capstone process, I have examined the research question, *How can video games be used in educational settings to support student curriculum and foster worldly discussions?* Within chapter four, I will detail my journey through the capstone process and how my research question transformed over time. I will demonstrate the strengths of my project and journey through the capstone process. I will expound on the challenges and limitations of my project and the changes I would make to
enhance my project. Lastly, I will discuss the findings of my capstone project and the plan to use my project in the future.

**The Journey**

The journey through my capstone was overall a difficult one. I knew I wanted to make a project based on using video games in the classroom to help teach elements of language arts, but there were so many video games to choose from. Questions I asked myself were, *what games will have the largest impact on examining different perspectives and providing conversation starters? What games are culturally and age appropriate? What platforms and systems will my students need in order to play? What accessibility will teachers and students have to my recommended material?* There were so many directions I could take my project and I had difficulty choosing. Another deeper conversation I wanted to have was about the debate between video games being cathartic or catalytic, as discussed in chapter two. I ultimately decided that while examining that conversation was important to me, I was steering my ideas away from the main purpose I had of incorporating video games in the classroom and would be better suited as a subtopic rather than the sole focus of my capstone.

As I continued on my journey to creating my capstone and as I mentioned in chapter one, my research question changed three different times before I settled on my current question. I found that each question I had formulated prior to my final one was detracting from the main point I wanted to examine. I wanted to focus on sparking conversations about the world and society around us and not so much on specific theories
or points. I am confident in the question I ultimately chose, and found that using my final question to guide my project was helpful and intuitive.

As I constructed my chapter two literature review, I found it difficult to again limit my research to my focus. Video games have been a hot topic for decades, since critics have often challenged the violence and dark aesthetics found in many mainstream first person shooter games. Some critics often argue that violent video games are the root causes of real life mass shootings. With that knowledge, I had a hard time deciding how to formulate my literature review and what literature I thought would be best to include and inform my project. I ultimately found that including literature surrounding ideas like the history of video games, the positive and negative effects of gaming, different genres of games, and the importance of worldly discussions were best suited to inform my project. I found that throughout my entire journey, chapter two was the most difficult and time consuming piece of my capstone.

As I progressed through the creation of chapter three, I found my journey ran smoother. When I approached the creation of my project, I came in with a generic plan of what I wanted to do, which was create a teaching packet of a short unit surrounding the use of video games in the classroom. I didn’t have specific details in mind, other than the video game I wanted to use and the state standards I thought would best accompany the activities and lessons I envisioned. As I began constructing the packet, I had some trouble getting started but once I was able to complete my first lesson plan and take a step back to visualize my vision, I started to have a better idea of specifically what I wanted to incorporate. I only wanted to create three lesson plans, but as my project and creative
process began to flow, and realizing I needed a more summative assessment to wrap my unit up, I decided last minute to extend my unit into a fourth lesson plan. I am confident in the final draft of my project, and proud of the work ethic and persistence it took to complete that.

As I explained, my research question took many forms before it settled on *How can video games be used in educational settings to support student curriculum and foster worldly discussions?* I talked about my experiences formulating each chapter of my capstone, with chapter two’s literature review being the most challenging and time consuming. I will now explore the strengths of my capstone project and how I uncovered those strengths.

**Strengths**

Reflecting on my journey through the capstone process, I found that certain things came easier and aided my project conveniently. One thing I was confident in was my final research question. Once I settled on the final draft of my question, I used that as a driving force and always felt connected to the phrase “worldly discussions.” Especially while lesson planning within my project, whenever I got off track or flustered, re-reading that phrase seemed to always reign my ideas and visions back in. I realized that regardless of the content or ideas I had, the bottom line of my teaching philosophy is about opening students’ minds and teaching them *how* to think, not *what* to think. I clung on to that phrase “worldly discussions” and was able to tell myself, *yes, this is how we can achieve that. Are students going to read this and have questions or comments about*
the world around us? Those were questions I asked myself as I finished creating my lesson plans and finalized my project.

Another strength I found within myself throughout the creation of my capstone was that I have a lot of knowledge myself on this topic. As someone who has played video games since I was a young child, I have a lot of intellect on the different types of games, and the positive and the negative effects they can have on a player just from experience. I also found my studies in my previously mentioned undergraduate classes to be helpful in supporting my ideas. I thought I would have an easier time constructing my literature review because of all my prior knowledge on the subject, but I almost felt increasingly overwhelmed because I know what critics and readers on this topic have said and often argue about. I specifically found author Arena’s idea that players can feel emotions such as “tension, frustration, disappointment, discouragement, anger, and even boredom” and joy, and still continue to want to play while gaming to ring true as I formulated lessons around Papers, Please. (Arena, 2002, p. 95). With my own knowledge and the addition of the scholars I cited in chapter two, I was able to confirm and build on my lessons and feel confident that Papers, Please would spark deep conversations.

Another strength I found was that I had completed a lot of helpful projects and assignments during my graduate studies that helped with the completion of my project. When I was lesson planning, I retrieved an old assignment that was filled with language arts literary activities for different types of assignments and lessons. I was able to draw from that to include those assignments in my lessons, specifically the Character Bio and the Critical Literary Response handouts seen in my capstone project. Though I may not
have felt it at the time, I am grateful I put in the work in years passed to create detailed assignments in my previous studies because it proved helpful with the completion of my capstone.

As I analyzed my strengths, I found that by formulating a strong final research question, I was able to keep my project focused and on track. I found during my literature review that I had a lot of personal knowledge surrounding my topic, coming from both personal experience and prior research. The last strength I noted was the completion of helpful assignments and work I had produced in previous graduate classes that aided with lesson planning in my project. As we proceed forward, I will now address the challenges I faced while completing my project and the limitations my final project may have.

**Challenges and Limitations**

As I reflect on the things I wrestled with during my capstone, the biggest piece that comes to mind is completing the literature review. As I mentioned before, there were so many conversations and critical theories I could have included in the review, but not all of them were practical for what I was trying to accomplish with my project. One specific thing I struggled with was finding credible sources that weren’t just opinion pieces or popular sources in regards to the positive and negative effects of gaming. Oftentimes and even today, critical pieces come from people constructing theories or trying to make connections with video game usage and real life events, like mass shootings. It took a lot of searching to find research based articles that made claims based on findings rather than opinion or headlines.
Another challenge I encountered was after the creation of my capstone project. As with all projects, there are items or pieces that might not be practical or accessible. One limitation I found was in regards to the accessibility of the PC platform Steam and asking educators to purchase Papers, Please in order to use my teaching packet. While Steam is free and easily downloadable, asking educators to purchase multiple sets of Papers, Please for $9.99 on each device may be a limitation for some. Depending on each individual school district, sometimes funding is not available for teachers to use for purchasing items such as a game for learning. Educators that did not already have Papers, Please would have to speak with their administration to receive permission to purchase, and there is the possibility their administrators could say no. They could also purchase the games from their own pocket, but that would not be practical or ideal.

The last limitation I found was that I have not implemented this unit in a classroom before, so timestamps and the lengths of activities may need to be altered. I also know it may be hard for teachers to implement if their district is not open to downloading Steam and purchasing the game. I also have made a unit plan based in Minnesota, so educators around the country would have to adapt my lessons to achieve standards based on the state they teach in. However, my plan is that even if educators are not able to use my packet, they can at least see how the use of a video game in the classroom can be a focal point for developing a good lesson or unit.

While reviewing the challenges and limitations to my project, I discussed the difficulty I faced while completing my literature review. I also outlined the potential limitations to my project, including accessibility issues and potential difficulties
educators may have with my lesson plans, since the lessons have not been tested in a real classroom environment. Next, I will interpret the findings of my project and research question.

**Findings**

The largest finding and takeaway I found after completing my capstone was the finding that incorporating video games into the classroom is both possible and successful in creating worldly classroom discussions. As I played *Papers, Please* myself to ensure I was remembering the right ideas and formulating accurate questions throughout my project, I found that I definitely chose a game that can be used to foster worldly discussions. One of the activities for one of my lessons is to read an article and jigsaw with other students who read a different article about immigration problems around the world. Proof reading these activities affirmed my belief that playing this game, in fact, does allow students to learn about and discuss difficult, real situations of which many different people around the world have been affected by. I wish that I had an opportunity to discuss this game in my own class where I played *Papers, Please* for the first time.

The second finding I found was that although creating a language arts unit that incorporated video games into the curriculum was time consuming and meticulous, it was easy to do. I am confident in my final project and its ability to be successfully used in a real classroom. Completing my project and reminding myself of my research question has confirmed my belief that using video games in the classroom can be an easy, effective, and life changing experience for students to learn and interact with content in a new way that teachers often fail to explore. If educators are dedicated to student learning
and reaching students of all backgrounds and skill levels, then video games should not be
forgotten and should rather be consistently sought after.

As we have seen in my findings, incorporating video games into the classroom is
possible and easy to do with the right amount of accessibility. My research question of
using video games to foster worldly discussions is also possible and video games should
continue to be sought after by educators as a successful teaching and learning tool. In the
next portion of my capstone, I will address the plans I have for the implementation of my
project and the main takeaway I want educators to have.

**Project Plans**

The main purpose of my project was to provide a packet for teachers to use as a
mini unit within their classroom that incorporated video games. Since I am currently a
paraprofessional in a high school, I am not able to incorporate my packet into my
classroom yet. When I finish my licensure, which is projected within the next year, the
plan for my project is to use it in my future classroom one day. Once I achieve further
credibility by becoming licensed, I plan to share my unit with my colleagues and
encourage them to use video games in their curriculum if not directly use my unit.

As I have mentioned before, the true takeaway I want readers and educators to
have is that even if accessibility is an issue, that they could see using video games in the
classroom to foster worldly discussions and further teach their curriculum is important
and achievable. If educators can see the positive effects and the findings of my capstone,
then I have achieved my goals. I want to use this project as the basis for educators, and I
plan to continue my research and implementation of using video games in the classroom.
Summary

In conclusion, the process to completing my capstone has been an adventure. My research question changed a handful of times, and I struggled to write my literature review with all of the conversations society has had about the integrity of video games. I found my strengths in the previous work I had completed in my graduate studies that helped me complete my project, and found that I had a great amount of personal knowledge on the subject of video games. I noted my challenges and limitations that included working harder to find credible, academic sources that were unbiased and research based, as well as limitations including accessibility and not having taught the lessons in a live classroom before. I also talked about the intention of usage for my project, which includes allowing readers to see the benefit gaming can have on students in the classroom if not implementing the lessons themselves. I plan to use my unit in my own future classroom one day, and will use the work I have completed with my capstone project as a stepping stone to continuing research and implementation of using video games in the classroom.

The journey through my capstone has been full of ups and downs, but I am confident in the project I have completed and the capability of its usefulness. My aim is to continue providing educators with the tools to use video games in their classroom, and the guidance they may need to do so. If I can change the life of even one single student by asking them to play a video game for academic purposes, then my entire capstone, research and effort will have been worth it.
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