

12-2021

Video Games and Their Potential as Literacy Tools

Jessica Reich
Northeastern Illinois University, jreich2@neiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://neiudc.neiu.edu/uhp-projects>



Part of the [Language and Literacy Education Commons](#), [Other Computer Sciences Commons](#), and the [Other English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Reich, Jessica, "Video Games and Their Potential as Literacy Tools" (2021). *University Honors Program Senior Projects*. 28.

<https://neiudc.neiu.edu/uhp-projects/28>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Theses and Projects at NEIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Honors Program Senior Projects by an authorized administrator of NEIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact neiudc@neiu.edu.

VIDEO GAMES AND THEIR POTENTIAL AS LITERACY TOOLS

A Thesis Presented to
the Faculty of the University Honors Program
Northeastern Illinois University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
of the NEIU Honors Program
for Graduation with Honors

Jessica Reich
December 2021

HONORS SENIOR PROJECT
ACCEPTANCE AND APPROVAL FORM

Jessica Reich

Video Games and Their Potential as Literacy Tools

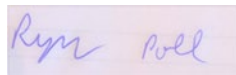
This thesis has been reviewed by the faculty of the NEIU Honors Program and is found to be in good order in content, style, and mechanical accuracy. It is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the NEIU Honors Program and graduation with honors.



12/10/21

Prof. Timothy Barnett, Department of English
Faculty Advisor

Date



December 8, 2021

Prof. Ryan Poll, Department of English
Faculty Reader

Date



December 9, 2021

Dr. John Casey, Department of Philosophy
Honors Curriculum & Standards Board

Date



10 December 2021

Prof. Jon B. Hageman, Department of Anthropology
Coordinator, University Honors Program

Date

ABSTRACT

Video games are an essential part of emergent popular culture, with millions playing games every day. With how popular gaming has become, it is logical to research its full potential as a literacy tool both inside and outside the classroom. This thesis contributes to the discussion of the importance and potential of video games as a literacy tool that can be utilized educationally and through gaming at home. This thesis includes a section for gaming definitions, a literature review on research on video games and their impact on education and literacy skill development, a discussion of video game narratives, and how video games can help bridge the gap between various forms of literacy. The types of video games studied vary from games designed for learning to two of the most popular video games of all time: *Minecraft* and *World of Warcraft*. In conclusion, I will discuss and analyze the research based on my opinion of gaming and literacy through my experiences as a gamer.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
INTRODUCTION.....	1
DEFINITIONS.....	2
LITERATURE REVIEW.....	4
ANALYSIS & DISCUSSION.....	15
CONCLUSION.....	25
REFERENCES.....	26

INTRODUCTION

Video and computer gaming have become a significant part of the current popular culture for many people - especially children, adolescents, and young adults - and a popular form of socializing and community building, as players interact with and get to know one another (Alexander, 2009). The video game industry has skyrocketed by 20% alone in the past year (marketwatch.com) and amassed over 2.69 billion online players in 2020 (finances.watch.com). While many people worldwide enjoy playing games, gaming can also be a complex subject to approach educationally due to some negative stigmas surrounding it. Some people are concerned that video games can end up causing children to become violent. However, recent research has found no evidence of a relation to video games and an increase in violence (Suziedelyte, 2021).

Video games and gaming have become very popular amongst students and can be used in the classroom to help motivate and encourage learning. We already know that students now relate to graphics over text (Simpson and Clem, 2008), and that students interact with multiple forms of literacy throughout a typical day. These literary forms can range from print materials or through the internet, texting, social media, and video games, which can all be used as tools for academic content (The International Reading Association, 2020). With the rising popularity of video games, the study of video games in the United States was formed by James Paul Gee, the leading expert in the study of video games and literacy. Throughout this honors thesis, I want to show that based on previous research done on the subject and through my own experiences, video games

have the potential to be used as a literacy tool to positively improve literacy skills both inside and outside of the English classroom.

This honors thesis will include a literature review composed of articles discussing or researching video games' potential to increase literacy skills and social development for children and adults. Research is included about how video games can be used to increase these skills, how these games are narratives, and how they can be utilized both inside and outside of the classroom. The games discussed range from educational-based games that can be played both inside and outside of the classroom to popular games like *Minecraft* and *World of Warcraft*. This honors thesis contributes to the discussion of video games and literacy and how important it is for more research to be done on this subject. After this first section, I will discuss my experiences as a gamer. It is important to analyze how video games can help others develop literacy skills and how to correctly implement this new way of digital learning in the classroom. Video games have so much potential and can be beneficial for more than just for enjoyment, and can have many positive benefits to one's education, empathy, social skills, and cultural understanding.

DEFINITIONS

There are many different types of video games. Some games are designed for educational purposes, which are called *educational-based games*. These are the games you can find tailored for students on subjects such as math, art, and English. They are also the most common free games that one would find online, and this type of learning is called game-based learning, or *GBL* (Chen). *Single-player games* are designed only to be

played by one player at a time. These games are more focused on telling a story to the player through gaming. *Multiplayer games* are played with two or more people. *Online multiplayer games* are played online, with hundreds and thousands of people accessing the game's online servers simultaneously. *PvP* means player vs. player. The players can either be fighting against or with other players as they accomplish the goals the game has set out for them.

In addition, there are dozens of different types of video game genres for all ages, such as adventure, action, RPG (*role playing*), sports, sandbox, strategy, and stimulation. These games are played on consoles such as the PlayStation, Xbox, Nintendo Switch, and the computer, or can even be played from a phone or tablet. The two main video games discussed in this paper are *Minecraft* and *World of Warcraft*. *Minecraft* is a sandbox-type game, which places the player in a vast world, where the player has the free will to interact with and change the world around them. *Minecraft* can be either played as a single-player experience or as an *MMO*, which means a massively multiplayer online experience. *World of Warcraft* is a fantasy *MMORPG*; a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. Many of these games are typically played for fun. Still, there are also other reasons why “gamers” would play a game, such as socializing and having a sense of community or togetherness. These ways of playing also form the gateway to different types of literacy. It is essential to learn how both educational and non-educational-based video games can be beneficial towards education and literacy development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature in Game Studies is growing quickly. As gaming has become so popular and widespread, so has research about its cultural and educational impacts and benefits. Some games are designed to be primarily educational, while others are designed for entertainment. Each type of game has its unique benefits. However, both are equally important in the study of the relationship between video games and literacy.

Gaming as a Literacy Tool

Video games have drastically changed over time, evolving from simple games such as Pac-Man and Pong to more complex games with story-mode content on average lasting for about 20+ hours of gameplay (theringer.com). They are an important part of the current popular culture, especially amongst children and teenagers (Beavis, 2014).

As we play video games, we are developing new types of literacies (Gee). James Gee has written much about video games' potential in regards to literacy and learning and was one of the earliest to see this potential. In *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* (2003), Gee argues that video games are rising in popularity and need to be analyzed as a new type of literacy and that it is important to figure out the role that video games can play in the classroom. Gee discusses 36 principles of learning that can be found in most video games and discusses how teachers can use these principles of learning to incorporate video game-based learning in their classrooms. Since this book, Gee has become a leading expert in the subject of Game Studies and has published multiple important articles and books on the subject over the past two decades.

Educational-based literacy games can be used to help students develop and attain literacy skills at a young age. The visuals and audio in the game can help students get more motivated and involved in their learning. There are thousands of educational-based games and websites online, with most of them free to play. Some teachers have also developed games to use in their classrooms to promote learning. In *Learning through play: The impact of web-based games on early literacy development* (2018), Kelly Schmitt's group wanted to see how web-based educational games could be useful in helping young children develop essential literacy skills. This study assigned 136 kindergarteners and preschoolers from the ages of four to six to play either literacy or non-literary-based games (such as puzzles or art games) online for eight weeks at home (Schmitt). These educational-based games were made specifically for children to attain the necessary literacy skills needed in that specific age group and focused on things like spelling and rhyming. The children were tested on their literacy skills before and after the eight weeks, and the group that was assigned the literacy-based games showed increases in nearly all essential early development literacy skills, such as alliteration, vocabulary, and phonics (Schmitt).

Studies like this show that video games can be effective in learning and literacy development as early as kindergarten or preschool, even outside of the classroom. These children showed positive results after being introduced to the educational games online and were able to play them at home in their own free time instead of in the classroom. Since children are now more commonly exposed to the internet and electronics from a very young age, teachers should utilize these online web-based educational games both

inside and outside of the classroom. This method would also work well solely in the classroom if the children were not able to easily access a laptop or internet at home.

Each player has their own unique experience while playing and interacting with the game's world. In his article "Gaming, Student Literacies, and the Composition Classroom: Some Possibilities for Transformation" (2009), Jonathan Alexander argues for the incorporation of gaming in the literacy classroom by studying the literary experiences of gamers. Alexander says that "at the most basic level, gaming involves complex use of multiple modes of writing and a need to develop a sense of how text and visuals interact" and games provide an environment in which gamers are "developing and playing with a variety of complex literacy skills" (Alexander, 36). He acknowledges that the times are changing and the next generation will see "literacy" as an image of the "screen" rather than the act of writing, and a teacher can learn just as much from the student as they both learn and reflect on this ever-changing age together (Alexander, 38). We are in a digital literacy age now, where most students spend a huge portion of their time online.

Alexander and Gee are just two of many who have acknowledged that technology has made a tremendous impact in our lives, and we must act to fully understand its potential at all levels and how we can use technology like video games in the classroom.

Video Games as Narrative

“I was struck, too, by the very literary qualities of some games and the imaginative worlds they conjured for reader/players.”

- Catherine Beavis, “Games as Text, Games as Action.”

Video games are full of rich and complex narratives with different lore and mythologies surrounding them. These games are based around imaginary worlds that are meant to draw the player in and keep them emotionally and sometimes even monetarily invested in the game. To do that, the stories that are told in most games must be interesting enough to draw the player in and have a rich narrative that keeps the gamer invested in playing and completing the game. This is shown especially in *single-player games*, which are based around a story that the player has to complete, similar to a person reading and finishing a novel. The completion of the game can be accomplished by solving puzzles, completing quests, and progressing through the world that is created inside of the game. These campaigns are often a long endeavor to complete, with the average length of a base single-player campaign being about 23 hours long (theringer.com). *Multiplayer games* also have their own rich stories that are either formed by the game developers and the community that forms around the players.

These narratives are also important and have as much merit as other forms of storytelling media. Johnathan Ostenson sees the potential that video games have to offer in “Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom” (2013). Ostenson explores how video games are a type of literacy narrative and are an

“unexplored territory in studying the nature and impact of narrative.” Video games represent some of the most important storytelling in the 21st century (Ostenson). Games are a form of digital media with narratives on par with television shows or movies. Each is designed to tell a certain story to their viewers or gamers. Stories that are told in video games can be just as emotionally compelling as a movie, TV show, or even a novel. Video game players are known to prefer games to books because they feel more immersed in the narratives of games rather than books (Picton).

Constance Steinkuehler, a games researcher at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, agrees that games are narratives. In “Video Games and Digital Literacies” 2010, Steinkuehler says that at the most basic level, “video game play itself is a form of digital literacy practice” because gaming is a type of literacy narrative (Steinkuehler). Steinkuehler argues that “games are narrative spaces that the player inscribes with his or her own intent” (Steinkuehler).

These narratives that are found in video games can be used in the classroom for student involvement and motivation. If a student is more involved in the story that the game is telling, they will be more motivated to complete the game. In this way, video games can even be designed for use in the classroom, revolving around their complex narratives. In “Digital Game-Based Learning, What’s Literacy Got To Do With It?” (2015), Hiller Spires is a teacher that helped design video games for his students to play in the classroom. Spires believes that teachers can use digital games to enhance student engagement, disciplinary literacy, and content knowledge (Spires). Spires sees the potential that video games have inside and outside of the classroom and how video games

can have their own unique narratives. Spires has used this knowledge to develop video games for his students to use for learning in his classroom, revolving around and compelling narrative. Spires' students play two different versions of a video game called *Crystal Island*, which has the players stranded on an island and tasked to complete multiple quests that help them develop "skills in problem-solving, map reading, and navigation" (Spires). Spires made the story narrative interesting and compelling enough that the students would want to complete the story to the end. Spires also links game-based learning to the Common Core standards and says that it does meet some of them. In his game, for example, students are required to think, read, and write like a scientist to solve the game's mystery, which is similar to the Common Core's Standard about how students build knowledge about the world through interaction with the text. Spires believes that more research needs to be done on how video games can be used in the classroom because it is very important to have a "fully defined picture of how games affect learning and literacy" (129).

What also makes video games stand out is that each player is able to have different experiences while playing and interacting with the game. A player's choice in a game can not only drastically change the story, but can also lead to them experiencing different events and quests that vary from player to player. Thomas Apperly notes the importance of the player's experience with the game in "What games studies can teach us about videogames in the English and Literacy classroom" (2010). Apperly discusses Game Studies and how video games are both an interactive entertainment media and part of contemporary audio, visual, and narrative cultures (Apperly, 12). While playing, students

are doing more than just taking in a narrative, and the unique experiences of the player are important.

While interacting with the game and in-game text, players are also increasing their literacy skills. Apperly believes that the player's experiences are important because the players are active constructors of textual meaning by interacting with the text to produce meanings that may or may not differ from the encoded meaning in the text (Apperly, 16). Through interacting with the game and decoding its meanings through images and text, players become both readers and writers.

Players are also spending much time in-game reading and intaking information. Research has found that the reading level of most in-game text is often far higher than the player's measured reading level in school (Arkansas State University). The students can read and understand the more complicated texts due to their enthusiasm on the subject.

Popular Games

Games can be played outside of the classroom to improve literacy skills as well, even if that is not the player's intention while playing. Students can play educational-based games solely for learning as Schmitt instructed his students to do, or gamers can play for their own enjoyment. As gamers play different types of games, they are also learning different literacies. Popular games can also be studied and utilized both inside and outside of the classroom.

The literature suggests that Minecraft is an important game to play both inside and outside of the classroom. *Minecraft* is an open-world sandbox video game where the

player is in a randomly generated map where they build and explore the world by building and destroying blocks. They also can farm resources and materials to craft things to survive. There are two different game modes where you can play with friends or alone. Creative mode gives you everything at your disposal and the ability to fly around the world and build. Survival mode places the player(s) in the generated world with an avatar that has health and can die. They must destroy blocks, gather materials, and build to survive. Since the game was first released in 2011, *Minecraft* has exploded in popularity, with its player base dramatically increasing over the past decade. As of March 2021, *Minecraft* had more than 140 million active players of all ages worldwide (Statista). There is something simple yet complex about *Minecraft*'s mechanics that almost anyone can get into, and it is extremely popular with both children and adolescents. In addition, the game does not come with any instructions or tutorials, which forces players to either figure it out on their own or turn to outside sources to get information (Clive). *Minecraft* has become a stimulus for writing and making content on the game. There are hundreds of guides and tutorials posted on YouTube about *Minecraft*, with many more written guides posted on various websites across the internet. Many books and guides on *Minecraft* have also been published.

Minecraft also has gathered a large community around the game. There are various Discord groups dedicated to *Minecraft* with hundreds of thousands of users. Gamers of *Minecraft* are developing new types of literacy skills by reading, writing, and interacting with each other, and forming these communities online together. Naturally,

when a game gets so popular and well known, studies have begun on the game's potential use as a tool for learning.

One study was made about *Minecraft* by high school English teacher Rick Marlatt called "Literary Analysis Using Minecraft: An Asian American Youth Crafts Her Literacy Identity" (2018). In this study, Marlatt had his students play *Minecraft* to help them further understand a book that they were currently reading called *The Outsiders* (Marlatt). As an observer, Marlatt had his students play *Minecraft* for three 90-minute sessions in class and use the game to relate to the text. They were assigned to complete tasks in-game such as re-creating important scenes from the novel and picking an important character, theme, or figure to create their version of what the text meant to them. They could also create mobs in the game to represent a social group in the book (Marlatt). Throughout the study, Marlatt interviewed his students, obtaining their histories and questioning them on their engagement with both *Minecraft* and the text.

Through Marlatt's interviews and study, one student named Stella stood out more than the rest. Prior to this lesson, Stella was unengaged in class and did not relate to the texts. However, her interest in literature skyrocketed once *Minecraft* was introduced into the classroom. She was able to use the game to help her analyze the text and connect elements from that text with her life. Through *Minecraft*, Stella was able to "assume agency and power to craft her literacy identity through digital practices" (Marlatt, 64). Marlatt concludes that *Minecraft* helped his students get more engaged with the literature and understand it through their creative thinking, while also developing digital literacies

(Marlatt). He believes that “*Minecraft*, perhaps more so than other mediums, presents an ideal fit for teachers looking to enrich their literature study with genuine examinations of identity” (Marlatt, 65). He ends his study by encouraging educators to “consider how critical, technology- based investigations of literature can bolster students’ agency as constructors of meaning” (Marlatt, 65).

Minecraft can also be used as a form of motivation and engagement in the classroom in other ways than just playing the game. The game can be used as a gateway to other types of literacy. Carolyn Stufft in “Engaging Students in Literacy Practices Through Video Game Book Groups” (2018) discusses a study that she did with the students in her classroom. This study involved sixth graders in middle school who had to read two books for a book club. One was based on *Minecraft*, and the other was a book that had multiple popular culture video game references (Stufft). These students were able to use their common experiences playing *Minecraft* to form connections with others and be able to work with them to help further their understanding of literacy (Stufft). By participating in the video-game-related book groups, the sixth graders had the opportunity to read and discuss the literature and to share their knowledge, expertise, and experiences from the video gameplay (Stufft). At the end of her study, Stufft concludes that students were more engaged with both the literature and their classmates since they had something in common (Stufft). They were able to form a small community over their common interests in the game. *Minecraft* is a game with so much potential, both inside and outside of the classroom, to promote literacy, learning, motivation, and engagement.

Similar to *Minecraft* in popularity, *World of Warcraft* is the most popular MMORPG of all time (as of 2021). *Warcraft* is set in an open game fantasy world online, where the player designs an avatar and becomes a hero who fights monsters in dungeons and defends the world with other players. The game is 18 years old and has since come out with eight different expansions, which all provide new content and lore. *Warcraft* is still extremely popular even though a great length of time has passed since its release, with an estimation of 116 million total players or subscribers as of 2021 (MMO Population). No official count has been released by the game's developer Blizzard since 2015, but there have been online trackers that can provide us with some information that shows the game currently has about four to five million active monthly players as of September 2021 (Statistia). The game targets teenagers and adults, with a subscription-based gaming experience and complicated mechanics that most young children would not be able to grasp.

With how popular *Warcraft* has become throughout the past two decades, research has started on *Warcraft's* impact on our culture and community. Wanting to know more about this, Jonathan Alexander interviewed college students who played *World of Warcraft* and asked them what they thought they learned while playing the game. The students replied that they learned leadership skills by leading and organizing their guild, problem-solving, and how to better communicate and work as a team with others. In *Warcraft*, players have to work together to solve puzzles and defeat bosses, with much time spent preparing and studying in advance of a "raid" that can have as many as forty players at a time to face the most difficult challenges the game has to offer.

As with many online group-based games, communication is very important to their guild, and they communicate with that guild across a “variety of different venues and platforms” (Alexander). There are also thousands of guides or media posted online surrounding World of Warcraft, such as guides and tutorials, books, and YouTube videos.

While some research has been done on the potential of video games in regards to literacy, several Games Studies experts in the literature have noted that more research needs to be done to fully understand video games’ impact on literacy as a whole. There have been many advancements in the digital age in the past decade alone, and researchers are struggling to keep up with its cultural and educational benefits and impact. However, the research that has been shown in this literature review shows that video games do have much potential both inside and outside of the classroom. They can be used to promote engagement in the classroom and with the texts and use these games as a bridge to other types of reading. When played outside of the classroom, players are able to engage with a narrative and form communities while using and gaining several literacy tools.

ANALYSIS

Video games are a vital part of the current popular culture and should be studied accordingly. The research has shown they can promote engagement and motivation in the classroom and that these game narratives can be just as rich in story and content as other forms of media. They can reflect what is going on with the current culture and society and specific attitudes towards gender, race, and identity (Shliakhovchuk & Garcia, 2020). Many communities have been formed by gaming, with gamers primarily communicating

through messages online. Video games can also be seen as a gateway to other types of literacy, as seen by previous studies involving *Minecraft* and *World of Warcraft*. Much more research and discussion about video games is needed to understand their cultural and educational impacts fully. Through my experiences playing video games over the last two decades, I have seen the importance of video games in regards to literacy and community.

I have been playing games for as long as I can remember. I first played the Nintendo 64 when I was three years old, and I have been gaming ever since. My father passed the interest on to me as he was very interested in video games when I was young. I would spend my childhood playing many games on different consoles as they were released and replaced, continuing up until now where I primarily use a PlayStation 5 or Nintendo Switch to play games. I play both single-player and multiplayer games, with a majority of them being online with others. Gaming is one of my biggest passions, and I have seen firsthand how video games have so much potential both inside and outside of the classroom regarding gaming as a literacy tool and the benefits of the communities that form around a game.

Teachers are struggling now more than ever to motivate students to read. In an age where one can find information in a matter of seconds, interest in reading novels has been decreasing. Research has shown that video games can be used in an educational setting as a form of motivation. Like watching a television show or movie, teachers or parents can use games to motivate kids to read. Steinkuehler discovered that when she

assigned students who were struggling with reading to read some books about their favorite video games, they “devoured them with no help and nearly perfect accuracy” (Steinkuehler). Students naturally will want to interact with something that they enjoy, and video games can be used as another form of engagement and motivation in the classroom, as shown by Marlatt and Stufft. Their students were more involved playing *Minecraft* and reading books about it than with other texts assigned in the classrooms. Teachers are then able to use this initial interest to help them become interested in other types of text. Students will perform better when they are interested in the subject content, and it can provide something that the student is already familiar with to work off of. When students start to feel comfortable within their realm of literacy, they are free to explore and develop the strategies of expert readers (Jolley, 2008). They will also seek out texts above their reading level if they are interested in the content. Children will read video game manuals with a reading score level of grades 8-11 and be well below that level (Clive), but will read this complex text because they are interested in that specific game.

Gaming also is a gateway to other forms of literacy. Gaming opens up so many different possibilities and skills to learn. When gamers learn to play games, they are learning a new type of literacy or language defined “above and beyond traditional reading and writing, but through multiple interactions including images, text, diagrams, symbols, and movements” (Hillard & Kargbo, 2017). Each game has different mechanics and gameplay that can be pretty complex. Figuring out these various mechanics can take some time and mental/physical coordination before the average player can navigate a

game properly while playing. Some games provide tutorials where the player is shown helpful tips and images to teach them about the gameplay or the game's lore. Other games like *Minecraft* come with little to no instructions, forcing the player to look at outside sources to help them understand and play the game. Players inspired by the game created these guides to share information with others and help the community. The most popular video games that have been released in the past two decades are complex enough that hundreds of thousands of guides have been posted and shared online about various games.

Players are constantly communicating with each other and seeking out information both inside and outside of the game. At the end of 2019, The National Literacy Trust in the UK surveyed 4,626 children between the ages of 11-16 to explore the relationship between literacy and video games in adolescents (literacytrust.org). Their results showed that 4 out of 5 of the adolescents who play video games also read materials relating to video games once a month, including in-game communications (39.9%), reviews and blogs (30.5%), books (21.8%), and fan-fiction (19.4%) (literacytrust.org). The results also showed that 3 out of 5 adolescents who play video games also write something about gaming at least once a month, such as scripts (62.5%), advice to help other players (22.1%), fan-fiction (10.8%), and blogs or reviews (8.0%). These results show that gaming can be a gateway between multiple literacies, including digital ones, and forming connections through communication and community. Students will seek out other forms of text to help them understand or complete their favorite

games. They also interact and develop communities with others by communicating through a variety of platforms.

Communication is a fundamental life skill to learn, especially in regards to literacy. It is not only a crucial skill to develop in one's childhood, but communication development continues throughout school, adolescence, and into adulthood (Hartshorne & Wood 2017). Communication and literacy development go hand in hand.

Communication with others helps increase one's vocabulary and ability to keep up with texts at or above their level. Students with higher communication skills can interact with and form connections with their peers easier than those with low basic communication skills. Besides being needed academically, communication also is a necessary skill to learn for the workplace and socially, where most jobs or activities involve interacting with others in some capacity.

Gamers are constantly communicating with others both inside and outside of the game. Communication can be an essential part of playing these games, especially when it comes to online multiplayer games, which rely on the players to work together for a common goal. Most games have in-game chat boxes where players can send messages to each other and the ability to talk to each other through voice chat. There are also many ways for gamers to communicate outside of the game, and video games "lie at the nexus of a complex constellation of literacy practice" (Steinkuehler, 2010). Alexander and Steinkuehler give us some good examples of where these literacy practices spread on the web. Gamers communicate through social media, text messages, message boards,

websites, user-posted guides, fan fiction, and fan art. As we have risen into a new technological and digital age, more and more new platforms have been created for gamers to gather, communicate, and socialize. The rise of social media has dramatically impacted how groups gather and socialize, especially gamers. Most popular online multiplayer games require you to work with others in some capacity. Using these online resources to find teammates is sometimes better than relying on matchmaking with “randoms.” Thousands of groups are on Facebook pages dedicated for gamers to gather and talk about a specific game while also LFG - looking for a group. Some threads can go into the hundreds as gamers discuss - and sometimes argue - about a game, while others connect and form new friendships and alliances by “grouping up.” Whether they know it or not, these players are constantly developing literacy and communication skills as they play the game and interact with others. Learning how to communicate and work with others is also an essential skill needed in all life stages. Sometimes, these video games scenarios can be the perfect places to learn these skills before facing them further in life.

One social platform that has dramatically risen in popularity for gamers to connect is Discord, a website/app where users participate in communities called “Discord servers.” These servers can be created by regular people and were at first formed around finding groups for gamers and communicating with others through text and the app’s voice chat. Discord was initially released in 2015. According to Discord’s website’s page titled “Our Story,” “Discord was started to solve a big problem: how to communicate with friends around the world while playing games online (discord.com).” Discord was developed for gamers to communicate with each other easily since there were not many

gaming-friendly spaces online. Discord helped gamers meet friends, look for groups, organize raids, and chat about games in text and voice chat. Multiple large communities started forming on Discord, with plenty of popular games beginning to create their own official Discords. Discord significantly rose in popularity and started to attract members from various communities and hobbies to its platform. Discord has just moved this past year from being primarily about gaming to now including every group or hobby in its brand. This change happened since the platform has more than 100 million monthly active users as of 2020, and not everyone on Discord is a gamer (blog.discord.com). Discord says that it is now used by everyone from local hiking clubs, art communities, and study groups, and that it is the place where the “world talks, hangs out and builds relationships” (discord.com). If Jonathan Alexander asked a similar gaming-based group today about how they primarily communicate with other players about the game, they would likely reply that they use Discord. It has become so popular in the gaming community that almost every gamer knows what Discord is and has an account.

I have some experience with the communities created through Discord. I was in charge of a gaming Discord group that had more than 3,000 members. This group was dedicated to the online aspect of the game ARK: Survival Evolved on PlayStation 4 & 5. The game is similar to Minecraft, with different open worlds to build in, tame dinosaurs, and fight in PvP mode (player-vs-player) against other players. With this game, players can buy and customize their own dedicated servers with rates and rules different from the official version. I was greatly interested in this game and wanted to have servers designed

to my specifications. I decided to purchase servers and ended up building quite the community called “Narnia”.

When joining the ARK “Narnia” servers on their PlayStations, players are shown a chat box pop up with a Discord invite, telling the player to join the Discord to get more information about the server. The ages of these players ranged from young pre-teens to adults in their late fifties. Their shared interest was in the game ARK and the ARK server "Narnia". Players would join this Discord server to find out information about the server and events or interact and find groups with other players. This server had players constantly reading and intaking information about the server and writing about the game. If players had questions, they just needed to ask in our “general” channel, and usually, another player would be quick to answer them or refer them to me.

While most players spent a majority of their time playing the game, I spent most of my time outside of the game forming this community and barely played the game. I spent many hours online looking up specific coding, rules, or tricks about the complicated mechanics of the PvP aspect of the game, which is what the server focused on. I also spent much time writing information about the server rules, rates, etc., and would post them into different channels to read. I would also spend time chatting with players through Discord. If I wasn't in the mood for talking, I was able to scroll through the server and read messages and conversations between the community. The community primarily interacted with each other through Discord since it was an easier way to

communicate than in-game on their consoles. Players were able to play the game while typing and chatting on their phone at the same time.

Through this Discord server and the other gaming-related Discord servers that I am in, I witnessed firsthand the benefits of gaming on multiple types of literacies and the communities formed around a game or any literate activity. By interacting with each other, these players gained a sense of community and literacy. I had players join from all over the globe with various age groups, with some players not knowing how to type in English correctly. I watched their English slightly improve the more they communicated with others in the server. When someone would send a message with an obvious grammar or spelling mistake, another player would most likely correct it. We also tried to keep things civil and mature, with strict rules and bans if the players did not follow them. Players had to learn to interact according to the rules and standards in this community, and for some players, this was their first time getting experience working with others in the "real world". Even if they were conscious of it or not, these players were increasing their vocabulary and literacy skills while communicating with others through the server. They learned how to communicate with others, form groups, and sometimes even learn some words in the English language or how to spell a word correctly.

As shown in the literature, video games are narratives and have told some of the best stories of the century, rivaling those told by books, television shows, or movies. *The Last of Us* is a video game released for PlayStation in 2013 as a primarily single-player game with a separate mode for PvP. The story takes place in a future where a fungus-like

zombie apocalypse has destroyed much of the world and focuses on characters Joel and Ellie as they travel across the ruined United States in search of a cure. As they progress through the story, the player gets to know the characters more and witness their father-daughter bond with each other develop throughout the game. Cut-scenes occur showing the player a scene similar to a movie. The player cannot interact with the game at this time, as these story events are predetermined. Their primary purpose is to shape the narrative in ways that the player could not do if they were in control. Throughout the storyline, the player grows emotionally attached to the characters as they travel the country and make decisions that will change their lives forever.

The Last of Us's storyline is compelling and complex, earning the game numerous awards, such as Game of the Year and Best Narrative. The developers recently released a sequel called *The Last of Us Part 2* in 2020, receiving many awards and praises for its story and narrative. I have played both games, and they are some of my favorite games of all time due to the stories they tell. These games make me laugh, cry, and empathize with the characters. I feel immersed in their world while playing and being able to play as and interact with these characters makes me form emotional connections with them and want to see them safe and happy. The relationships I form with these characters are more solid than those I form with the characters in novels. In *The Last of Us*, I can see these characters and have played as them. The average player can connect with the characters easier because they have seen them in some of their darkest or most emotional moments.

The Last of Us is one of many video game narratives that can rival or surpass those told in other forms of media. Video games can immerse you into the story similar to imagining yourself in a novel's world, but you can also see and interact with that world in real-time. Not only do they come with a rich and passionate narrative, but also promote empathy and cultural understanding. These types of games are literary texts that are worthy of being studied and explored. These narratives in games are essential to study as a form of motivation and engagement for students.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Why are video games so important to be seen as literary tools inside and outside of the classroom? In a digital age where children relate more to screen than text (Alexander, 2009) and about almost $\frac{3}{4}$ (73.1%) of young people do not like reading (Picton, 2020), more needs to be done to engage this generation's students with literature and each other through these communities.

Video games are an important part of the current popular culture and need to be studied in greater depth. They have so much potential in a variety of settings, and especially do so in regards to literacy development. They can be used educationally to engage and motivate students to learn from a young age and can also be played at home for one's enjoyment. The literature has shown that even if they are aware of it or not, gamers are increasing their literacy skills as they play the game and interact with others both inside and outside of the game.

But of course, there are many questions about video games and these communities that rise from them that need to be answered. We are in a new digital age, with technology constantly evolving and changing into things we have never seen before. As the next generations are raised on this technology, it is even more crucial to understand its full potential at all levels, both inside and outside the classroom.

REFERENCES

- “About Discord | Our Mission and Values.” *Discord*, discord.com/company.
- Alexander, Jonathan. “Gaming, Student Literacies, and the Composition Classroom: Some Possibilities for Transformation.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 61, no. 1, 2009, pp. 35–63. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40593514.
- Adams, Megan Glover. “Engaging 21st-Century Adolescents: Video Games in the Reading Classroom.” *The English Journal*, vol. 98, no. 6, 2009, pp. 56–59. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/40503460.
- Apperley, Thomas. “What Games Studies Can Teach Us about Videogames in the English and Literacy Classroom.” *Australian Journal of Language & Literacy*, vol. 33, no. 1, Feb. 2010, pp. 12–23. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=asn&AN=48000985
- Beavis, Catherine. “Games as Text, Games as Action.” *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 57, no. 6, 2014, pp. 433–39. *Crossref*, doi:10.1002/jaal.275.
- Chen, Si, et al. “Games Literacy for Teacher Education: Towards the Implementation of Game-Based Learning.” *Educational Technology & Society*, vol. 23, no. 2, 2020, pp. 77–92. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/26921135.
- Citron, Jason. “Your Place to Talk.” *Discord*, 30 June 2020, blog.discord.com/your-place-to-talk-a7ffa19b901b.

Gee, James P. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003. Print.

Hartshorne, Mary, and Liz Wood. "Literacy: The Role of Communication Skills." *Sec Ed*, 8 Mar. 2017, <https://www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/literacy-the-role-of-communication-skills/>.

Hillard, Ann, and Harriet Kargbo. "Educationally Game-Based Learning Encourages Learners to Be Actively Engaged in Their Own Learning." *International Journal of Education and Practice*, 11 Apr. 2017, www.conscientiabeam.com/journal/61/html/4921

"Home Page." *Center for Emerging Media Design and Development*, www.centerforemdd.com/.

Honeyford, Michelle A., and Karen Boyd. "Learning Through Play: PORTRAITS, PHOTOSHOP, AND VISUAL LITERACY PRACTICES." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2015, pp. 63–73., www.jstor.org/stable/44011218.

"How the Video Game Industry Is Changing." *Investopedia*, www.investopedia.com/articles/investing/053115/how-video-game-industry-changing.

International Reading Association. (2012). Adolescent literacy: A position statement of the International Reading Association. Retrieved from www.reading.org/libraries/resources/ps1079_adolescentliteracy_rev2012.pdf

- Jolley, Kristie. "Video Games to Reading: Reaching out to Reluctant Readers." *The English Journal*, vol. 97, no. 4, 2008, pp. 81–86. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/30047252.
- Lindbergh, Ben. "Length Matters." *The Ringer*, The Ringer, 25 Aug. 2016, www.theringer.com/2016/8/25/16038806/video-game-length-playtimes-f7b8e38f949f.
- "Literacy: The Role of Communication Skills." *Sec Ed* www.sec-ed.co.uk/best-practice/literacy-the-role-of-communication-skills/.
- Marlatt, Rick. "Literary Analysis Using Minecraft: An Asian American Youth Crafts Her Literacy Identity." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, International Literacy Association, 2018. 62(1), 55– 66. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.747>
- "Minecraft Number of Players Worldwide 2018 | Statista." Statista, *Statista*, 2018, www.statista.com/statistics/680139/minecraft-active-players-worldwide/.
- "Number of Gamers Worldwide 2021/2022: Demographics, Statistics, and Predictions." *Financesonline.com*, 3 Feb. 2020, financesonline.com/number-of-gamers-worldwide/#:~:text=Statistics%2C%20and%20Predictions-.
- Ostenson, Jonathan. "Exploring the Boundaries of Narrative: Video Games in the English Classroom." *The English Journal*, vol. 102, no. 6, National Council of Teachers of English, 2013, pp. 71–78, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24484129>.

- Picton, Irene, et al. "Video Game Playing and Literacy: A Survey of Young People Aged 11 to 16. A National Literacy Trust Research Report." *National Literacy Trust*, 2020. *ERIC*, eric.ed.gov/?id=ED607911.&scope=site.
- Schmitt, Kelly L., et al. "Learning through Play: The Impact of Web-Based Games on Early Literacy Development." *Computers in Human Behavior*, vol. 81, Apr. 2018, pp. 378–389. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1016/j.chb.2017.12.036.
- Shliakhovchuk, Elena, and Adolfo Muñoz Garcia. "Intercultural Perspective on Impact of Video Games on Players: Insights from a Systematic Review of Recent Literature." *Educational Sciences: Theory & Practice*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2020, pp. 40–58. *Crossref*, files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1241464.pdf.
- Simpson, Elizabeth, and Frances A. Clem. "Video Games in the Middle School Classroom." *Middle School Journal* 39.4 (2008): 1–14.
- Spires, Hiller A. "Digital Game-Based Learning: WHAT'S LITERACY GOT TO DO WITH IT?" *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2015, pp. 125–130., www.jstor.org/stable/44011231.
- Steinkuehler, Constance. "Video Games and Digital Literacies." *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2010, pp. 61–63. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/20749077.

- Stuft, Carolyn J. “Engaging Students in Literacy Practices Through Video Game Book Groups.” *Literacy Research: Theory, Method, and Practice*, vol. 67, no. 1, Nov. 2018, pp. 195–210, doi:10.1177/2381336918787191.
- Suziedelyte, Agne. “Is It Only a Game? Video Games and Violence.” *Journal of Economic Behavior & Organization*, vol. 188, Aug. 2021, pp. 105–125, 10.1016/j.jebo.2021.05.014.
- Thompson, Clive. “How Videogames Like Minecraft Actually Help Kids Learn to Read.” *Wired*, 3 June 2017, www.wired.com/2014/10/video-game-literacy.
- “World of Warcraft - MMO Populations & Player Counts.” *Mmo-Population.com*, mmo-population.com/r/wow.
- “WoW Player Count 2015-2023.” *Statista*, www.statista.com/statistics/276601/number-of-world-of-warcraft-subscribers-by-quarter/.
- Witkowski, Wallace. “Videogames Are a Bigger Industry than Sports and Movies Combined, Thanks to the Pandemic.” *MarketWatch*, 22 Dec. 2020, www.marketwatch.com/story/videogames-are-a-bigger-industry-than-sports-and-movies-combined-thanks-to-the-pandemic-11608654990.