**Entertainment-Driven Virtual Simulations in the Social Studies:**

**Engaging Teaching & Live Assessment Strategies**

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As a career social studies educator, I am inherently fixated on two items along my endless journey towards instructional mastery: discovering and interpreting the unique passions and complex needs of my students. In order to remain fully focused on these objectives, I select pedagogical strategies that appeal to my strengths and interests. With my mission statement clarified, I reflected upon the vast chasm separating our prevailing technological saturation and current classroom strategies. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, "The Nation’s Report Card," only 18% of eighth graders perform at or above the proficient level in U.S. history (2014 Assessment). This abysmal score represents no significant change from the previous exam (2010), which begs the following question: how much have teachers adapted to the multimedia-soaked, virtually-connected society that American students presently exist in? What are some instructional tactics that educators can utilize to capitalize on modernity’s demand for instant gratification? Simply put, how can social studies educators breathe new life into mundane content and reverse this frightening trend of academic stagnation?

Charged with the herculean task of attuning the antiquated classroom with the adolescent learner’s social diet, I turned to the solace I sunk an embarrassingly-large fraction of my life into – video games. This amorphous term can best be understood as any virtual, interactive experience communicated by way of a console, computer, smartphone, tablet, or smart TV. The Entertainment Software Association (2015) reported that four out of five U.S. households own a device used to play video games, amounting to 155 million individuals actively gaming nationwide. This translates to roughly 42% of Americans playing video games regularly, understood as three hours or more per week, with a mean of two gamers in each game-playing household. Since these statistics are based on national averages rife with inequality, they do not accurately represent the integral position video games play in the American student’s daily routine. Kahne, Middaugh, Macgill, Evans, & Vitak (2008) discovered that ninety-seven percent of U.S. teenagers surveyed reported being regular consumers of video games, with nearly fifty percent responding affirmatively to playing a video games in the past 24 hours. Why not harness this enthusiasm for digital entertainment by connecting it to pivotal classroom content that corresponds with the themes evoked by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) and the C3 Framework?

Barbara Chamberlin, project director at the New Mexico State University Learning Games Lab, asserts that “games offer immediate feedback, you can see your progress, you can try something and be frustrated but later learn more… that’s why gameplay is so engaging to us” (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). This dynamism is precisely what the NCSS envisioned in their Technology Position Statement (2013b) when they commissioned social studies instructors to better translate informal, socially-oriented encounters (i.e. video games) into a more academic, civically-oriented curriculum. By incorporating virtual, interactive media in the classroom, otherwise known as the gamification of education, teachers create an interdisciplinary nexus between social studies content and the socialization of adolescents.

Infusing games into education offers instructors the benefit of connecting to students through immersive, digital environments capable of resuscitating a multitude of mundane social studies subjects. The exhaustive detail involved in developing both storyline and setting makes video games an ideal secondary source to be used in conjunction with primary sources, a key component of the Inquiry Arc of the C3 Framework (2013a). Game developers often spend years investigating their topic, sending artists around the globe to accurately portray destinations, historical and contemporary, committed to ensuring places appear as lifelike as possible. Through the application of gaming in the classroom, instructors can implement ideals and feelings that come naturally in digital environments, such as a sense of agency that inspires players to take control of their character’s future (Maguth, List, & Wunderle, 2015).

By becoming heroes with the power to transform virtual worlds, students are motivated to learn the course content as this would be necessary to make informed decisions (Gee, 2004). They will discover consequences and will more deeply understand that failure means an opportunity to start over and improve their performance (Gee, 2005b). As educators, we should strive to transfer those same concepts to our students in hopes of advancing a greater engagement in and content mastery of their social studies coursework. While video games are historically identified as male-dominated activity, recent data (2015) displays that girls aged eighteen or younger are rapidly surpassing boys as the leading content consumers, respectfully comprising 33% and 15% of the total market share. Educators must become cognizant of this growing trend when selecting titles, ensuring that playable female characters and storylines that includes female perspectives are present.

Since gamification is rooted in a social constructivist theoretical framework, the knowledge a student retains is determined by his/her own experiences, mental structures, and beliefs (Gardner, 1991) that shaped the interpretation of the virtual events. Roblyer & Doering (2012) espouse similar sentiments, advocating for teachers to incorporate more hands-on, visual activities to aid students in their critical interpretation of real-world problems and issues. I echo this opinion, citing Barab, Gresalfi, and Arici’s (2009) definition of video games as powerful tools that expand the strategies associated with the traditional curriculum through digital quests and transform students into investigative reporters, environmental scientists, and historians who resolve meaningful dilemmas. This intersection between meaningful subject matter absorption, powerful pedagogical strategies, and seamless technological prowess has been labeled as the TPACK framework (Koehler & Mishra, 2009). Building upon Shulman’s (1986) notion of pedagogical content knowledge, students should be encouraged to make deep connections between the virtual worlds and the academic content, which will foster a richer understanding of the material in a novel and more authentic manner.

Along the gaming journey within the social studies classroom, pupils develop empathy and a deeper understanding of multiple perspectives; enhance their ability to put events in chronological order and show causal thinking; analyze primary documents for author’s purpose; write explanations of differing viewpoints; build literacy skills and exposure to new vocabulary; engage in complex classroom discussion about past events, problems, and perspectives (Gee, 2003; Squire, 2008; Barab, Gresalfi, & Arici, 2009; Abdul Jabbar & Felicia, 2015; Maguth, List, & Wunderle, 2015). In the following pages, I will elaborate on these vital pedagogical goals, demonstrating how video game-based content can enliven a social studies curriculum stuck at a standstill.

Prior to rolling out a game, instructors must fully familiarize themselves with the multimedia experience, considering the dominant themes of social studies instruction. Before, during, and after playing each part of the game, students must process the virtual interaction through discussion, writing, and other activities facilitated by the teacher. Educators must negotiate how much time will be dedicated to planning, in addition to establishing how and when students will play different parts of the game (Itō, 2010). Will the flipped classroom model be applied in order to have students play the game for homework and discuss the content in class? If the game will be played in class, will each student play his/her own game, work in small groups, or experience the digital world as an entire class with the instructor or a single student modeling the gameplay?

Due to the troubling economic reality colloquially referred to as the “digital divide,” I will be communicating recommendations for the latter model. Once the hardware (e.g. console, computer, smartphone, tablet, or smart TV) has been procured, the instructor must go through the vetting process of selecting the most engaging yet teachable software title possible. According to Gee (2005a), there are three distinct genres of social studies video games: simulations such as *Red Dead Revolver/Redemption*, which are semi-historical games that draw on historical concepts not bound to specific times or places; counterfactuals such as the *Civilization* series, understood as games that take place in a historical setting that allow the player to engage in extraordinary actions that impact/change history; documentary adventure/role playing games such as chapters of *Mission U.S.*, which are true to real events and allow players to take the role of real people from history.

In order to narrow the scope of the strenuous assignment of choosing a game, I will be concentrating on a distinct type of simulation. Simulations, as Wright-Maley (2015) points out, are an amalgamation of the blurred lines and overlapping fibers of our social identity. Within the realm of social studies simulations, I contend that the bleeding edges of content knowledge should seep across in an entertaining format. Many video games marketed purely for entertainment purposes turn out to be an effective tool for teaching students complicated information and skills (Gee, 2005a). It is in this vein that I propose open world platform games such as the *Assassin’s Creed* or *Grand Theft Auto* franchises for maximum classroom effectiveness.

“Open world” can be defined as a 3-D environment in which the playable character can either traverse freely throughout a meticulously-designed virtual universe or follow a structured storyline. Open gameplay, therefore, is the antithesis of linear gameplay; there are no objectives specifically set by the game and users are left to their own imaginations to decide what they will do and how they will do it (Squire, 2008). These virtual simulations offer indefinite opportunities for creative gameplay and modification to a given curriculum. “Platform” corresponds to the game’s availability on a console (e.g. Microsoft’s *Xbox 360/One*, Sony’s *Playstation 3/4*, Nintendo’s *Wii U*) or computer. Due to the performance specifications of these devices, these releases typically offer highly desirable gaming experiences that garner abundant media coverage and enhanced player eagerness.

While many parents purchase video games visibly labeled by the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) as “teen” (suited for ages 13+) and/or “mature” (suited for ages 17+), those same parents might take offense to a teacher selecting a simulation that “may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, blood and gore, simulated gambling, and/or strong language” (ESRB, n.d.). This obstacle can be overcome in the same manner that PG-13 and R-rated movies are legally sanctioned for broadcast in the classroom. As game industry sales eclipsed Hollywood box office numbers ($17 billion versus $9.42 billion in 2011), teachers must reformat their multimedia toolkit to mirror this rising consumer demand (Bronkhorst, 2012).

Every school’s administrative hoops vary but an open line of communication between the teacher, parents, and administration with plenty of notice can squash most objections to “controversial” pedagogical practices. The instructor must emphasize the point that the video game will be employed as an academic instrument to explore a virtual setting. While the playable character may have the capability to interact with the 3-D environment in an immoral fashion, the educator ensures the students will enjoy a scholarly experience by operating the console controller/keyboard. In order to achieve this end, the instructor must dedicate numerous hours to mastering the gameplay and memorizing the map. Once the class has more familiarity with the process of video game infusion, the teacher may consider sharing this duty with a trusted pupil(s).

Next, the instructor must find parallels between the NCSS themes/C3 Framework alluded to earlier and the interactive landscape made possible by the video game. With the connections to academic standards in place, it is time to develop higher-order thinking questions that nurture students’ visual analysis skills. Before exposing the class to the virtual simulation, however, generate curiosity in the subject matter by encouraging student inquiry. Utilizing a data collection mechanism like *Poll Everywhere*, social studies teachers can decode the elements of a particular historical era or political philosophy the class yearns to investigate further - students are more apt to “buy-in” to a curricular topic they helped structure. While “bring your own device” policies attempt to assuage the contentious relationship schools have with portable electronics, they do not repair the startling inequity plaguing this nation. As a stop-gap measure, many institutions provide classroom sets of laptops/tablets available upon teacher request.

With the necessary instructional materials in place (i.e. console/computer, open world platform game, class set of electronic devices), present the students with content-appropriate moving images found within the virtual environment. Then, require the class to identify applicable economic, social, political, and geographic components, as they would dissect a primary source document, through a think-pair-share approach. The teacher drives the discussion by constructing essential questions aligned with the digital backdrop; in doing so, he/she scaffolds the activity with background knowledge related to the main purpose of the lesson/unit. It should be stressed that a virtual simulation is by no means a substitute for traditional erudition. A classroom experience such as this cannot be successful without previous student interaction with the content and a well-oiled management system in place.

Time-tested social studies strategies like T-Charts can be repurposed to collect details from the video game on the left side and information about the historic period, subject, and incident on the right. Since this methodology could have been harnessed to analyze any form of multimedia, more innovative instructional techniques may be needed to entice today’s adolescent learners, as evidenced by Squire, DeVane, & Durga’s (2008) successful advancement of at-risk student interest in the discipline through the use of the counterfactual titles *Age of Empires* and *Rise of Nations*. While these games provide thorough opportunities for pupils to enhance their linear problem-solving ability, they do not appeal to the modern student’s inherent desire for customizable experiences and live interaction.

After analyzing the virtual social studies content in a large group setting, students can convey their responses via a live data collection repository, better known as a social media outlet (e.g. *Facebook, Twitter, Vine*). While these models are best suited for open-ended questioning, *Plickers*, or “paper clickers,” utilizes QR codes to report a class’ answers to a multiple-choice queries. This can be especially useful when establishing which video game locales or events will be reconnoitered, as determined by the previously mentioned student interest surveys. A fluctuating degree of modeling may be necessary depending on the specific characteristics of one’s classroom, as a pupil’s technological prowess is innately shaped by his/her previous access to electronic devices. Since conduits of social media generate mixed emotions, parents and administration must always be part of the dialogue. Educators should highlight the benefits of allowing students to interact with academic multimedia in the manner they are most accustomed to (i.e. live tweeting during a televised event or commenting on a YouTube video).

Entertainment-driven virtual simulations have the potential to more actively engage students in the visual analysis procedure. Coupled with live assessment tactics, teachers are rewarded with a multitude of authentic data that captures the class’ thought process. Using gaming as an ingredient of assessment can promote enhanced classroom motivation and encourages progress, cooperation, and camaraderie among students (Itō, 2010). For example, each pupil can assume the role of an individual or object in the virtual environment and announce their decision within the social forum. Subsequently, their peers will conduct an evidence-based interview to gain a deeper perspective into their chosen person or item. By collaborating in these digital worlds, students are afforded concrete experiences that clarify the murky concepts and theories all too common in social studies (Maguth, List, & Wunderle, 2015). For pupils lacking social aptitude or confidence with the material, school-appropriate, virtual communicative platforms like *Edmodo* or the more popular (but sometimes risqué) websites/apps mentioned abovecan function as a less judgmental venue to contribute to the classroom conversation.

As students continue to come in contact with social studies themes courtesy of digital entertainment more readily, teachers must take the necessary steps to promote, motivate and support gameplay and learning in the classroom (Abdul Jabbar & Felicia, 2015). Educators must be conscious of their pupils’ explicit needs and abilities, ensuring that a collaborative simulation such as *Assassin’s Creed 3* contains the necessary interactive materials and support structures (Wright-Maley, 2015). To stick with this example, set during the American Revolution, fans of the open world console game have created [wikis](http://assassinscreed.wikia.com/wiki/Assassin%27s_Creed_Wiki) containing image galleries, articles, forums, and a chat server in which players can interact with one another. As Clark, Tanner-Smith, Killingsworth, & Bellamy (2013) advise, gaming activities should correlate with students’ gender, game type preferences, preferred mode of gameplay, and the game’s learning tasks in order to provide a sense of enjoyment and motivation that rewards all parties. Moving forward, researchers and practitioners should develop entertainment-driven video game-based lesson plans in conjunction with adolescents in an effort to propose elements more suitable to enriching engagement and authentic learning opportunities (Abdul Jabbar & Felicia, 2015).

The digital environments of today and those on the radar for development in the near future (e.g. virtual reality technologies like the *Oculus Rift*) are unique forms of play that educators should embrace. Video games are becoming socially interactive in a way never before imagined. “Increasingly, players are gaming online, with friends, family, and complete strangers, crossing vast geographical distances and blurring not only cultural boundaries but also age and generation gaps, socioeconomic differences, and language barriers” (Granic, Lobel, & Engles, 2013, p. 76). As classroom teachers, we should adapt to our students’ extracurricular interests by visibly inserting them into the curriculum. The extensive amount of time adolescents invest in playing video games can translate to 21st century learning experiences laden with pedagogical benefits that have yet to be conceptualized.

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