

MEDIA LITERACY

THINKING CRITICALLY ABOUT
**VIDEO GAMES
& VIRTUAL WORLDS**

Peyton Paxson



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To the Teacher

TO UNDERSTAND THE FUTURE of learning we should look beyond schools to the emerging arena of video games. We suggest that video games matter because they present players with simulated worlds—worlds that, if well constructed, are not just about facts or isolated skills but that embody particular social practices. Furthermore, we argue that video games thus make it possible for players to participate in valued communities of practice and so develop the ways of thinking that organize those practices.

—Shaffer, Squire, Halverson, and Gee, *“Video Games and the Future of Learning”*¹

The author has been teaching criminal justice courses at a community college for 20 years. While there are a host of reasons why people attend community colleges, for many community college students, their academic experiences have included many disappointments. Another challenge that many criminal justice students face is the fact that they tend to be kinesthetic learners; the traditional classroom offers a distinctly unsuitable environment for this type of learner. Thus, criminal justice students are encouraged to avail themselves of out-of-class educational experiences when possible.

One option is the opportunity to attend a citizens’ police academy. Unfortunately, the majority of the content delivery at the academy is classroom lecture; it is not really much different from a college classroom, except that the lecturers are police officers. Students report that the most interesting, and in their minds, most valuable part of the academy is participating in a police patrol simulation. In other words, a video game. You are probably not surprised to learn that these students tend to retain much more of what they learned in the simulation than they did in the classroom lectures.

This book is not written by a hardcore gamer. Rather, it is written by a teacher who believes that educators need to use powerful and adaptable technology that students find both compelling and immersive. In many ways, the video game industry has proved

to be much more successful at engaging teenagers than the education system. This book, the ninth in a series that employs media literacy activities to teach critical-thinking skills, asks teachers and students to consider the possibilities that video games offer, as well as some of their problems.

This book also offers a unit on virtual worlds. Virtual worlds share some characteristics with video games, in that they involve role playing among participants. The power of virtual worlds lies in their ability to allow participants to reconstruct themselves and place themselves in environments that can be somewhat realistic or fantastic in the extreme.

Virtual worlds and video games offer varying degrees of interactivity and community. These allow players to consider existing societal norms, civic participation, and power structures, and experiment with new models. That this occurs within a popular medium enjoyed by so many teenagers is a reality that should not be ignored. Rather, gaming should be examined, with its constructive aspects embraced and its negative elements addressed. Students are already thinking about video games. This book attempts to have students think about video games in a critical and articulate fashion. Students are also encouraged to transfer what they know about and can learn from video games and virtual worlds into other learning experiences.

¹ www.academiccolab.org/resources/gappspaper1.pdf

To the Student

THIS BOOK ASKS YOU to do something that you probably have already done before: think about video games. You are likely a gamer yourself; if not, you certainly know people who are. Because video games are such a big part of many people's lives, especially teenagers, they need to be taken seriously. This book takes video games very seriously.

Video games generate certain attitudes and beliefs about life. They also either reinforce or challenge attitudes and beliefs that we already hold. They affect how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive other people. We will see that video games mean different things to different people, which only makes sense, as millions of people play video games.

The popularity of video games is also attractive to businesses. Not only do businesses make money by selling video

games, they also make money by selling advertising in games. Businesses also connect video games with other forms of media, such as television and movies. We will examine the business of video games in Unit 4.

Some people, including government officials, educators, and parents, are afraid of video games. Others believe that video games are, or at least can be, a good thing. In this book, we will examine both the positive and negative aspects of video games.

The last unit looks at virtual worlds. While virtual worlds are not necessarily games, they do involve much of the same technology that video games do. They allow participants to reinvent themselves, as do many video games. They also have the power that video games have to immerse people for hours at a time.



The objectives of this unit are to help students:

- explore the imperatives or incentives that compel people to inhabit virtual worlds
- recognize how virtual worlds are currently intersecting with people's real-life activities
- predict how virtual worlds will intersect with people's real lives in the future
- understand how virtual worlds can influence real-life culture

THE ONLINE MARKETING RESEARCH firm eMarketer estimates that by 2011, more than 50 percent of preteens and teenagers will use virtual worlds. This represents more than 20 million Americans, not including adults. Virtual Worlds Management, a virtual world trade media firm, identifies 60 "youth worlds," or virtual worlds specifically aimed at children or teenagers, that are currently online. Dozens of others are in development.

Virtual worlds are computer-based simulated environments. Virtual worlds constitute a key element of the so-called Web 2.0, the term used to discuss the growing trend in Internet usage in which people use the Internet to communicate and collaborate with large groups, share ideas and opinions, and display creative work. The interactivity of virtual worlds can also provide participants with a powerful transnational presence. The array of virtual worlds includes everything from virtual fantasy worlds to virtual classrooms.

One popular virtual world, *Second Life*, offers a free 3-D virtual world in which users can socialize, connect, and create using voice and text chat. A version called *Teen Second Life* is marketed as a safe place for those between 13 and 17 years old.

Teachers are allowed access to *Teen Second Life* for educational purposes. Note that in a class with students who are 17 or younger and other students who are 18 and older, it is impossible to include all of these students on the same projects in *Second Life*. The policy and procedure for teacher access to *Teen Second Life* follows below.

The main Grid of *Second Life* is for adults only (18+). We also have a *Teen Second Life* Grid (<http://teen.secondlife.com>), and that world is strictly for teens (13-17). We don't allow anyone under 18 years old in the adult world of *Second Life*, and likewise we do not allow adult Residents (18+) on the mainland of the Teen World. Both of these worlds are separate from each other, and we do not allow inworld travel or communication between them. *Teen Second Life* is a world for teens, created and shaped by teens. Please remember that falsely registering as a teen to gain access to *Teen Second Life* is a serious offense, and cause for permanent banishment from *all of Second Life*.

The *only* adults allowed on the mainland in *Teen Second Life* are Linden employees. If you are an educator and

want to work with teens in *Teen Second Life*, there is the opportunity to buy a private island on the Teen Grid and participate, but you will not be able to leave that island and visit the Teen Grid mainland. Teens from the mainland will be able to visit your private island if/when you choose, but they will be automatically informed that there are adults present. Also, if you are planning to use a private island on the Teen Grid to interact with teens from the mainland, we will need to run a background check on you for security and safety reasons.

If you'd like more details about getting a private island for education work on the Teen Grid, please go to http://simteach.com/wiki/index.php?title=Second_Life:_Educators_Working_with_Teens for details.

There.com is another virtual world. It offers a PG-13 environment with built-in filters to block inappropriate content and violence. *There.com* provides an opportunity to integrate classes of mixed ages on the same projects. *There.com's* administrators also aggressively attempt to monitor participation to ensure that the site is appropriate for those between 13 and 17 years old.

In This Unit . . .

Gender Bending introduces students to the widespread phenomenon of virtual world participants assuming genders different from their real-world genders. This activity is recommended as a class activity. Students can collaborate to compare and contrast the relative benefits and challenges that members of the opposite gender experience in the real world.

Where Do You Want to Be? has students examine geographic differences, political freedom, and restrictions on property usage to determine and evaluate their personal preferences for these issues.

Linden Dollars involves students in the intricacies of currency exchange and taxation. Students use this information to judge the real-world tax implications of virtual exchanges.

Anshe Chung employs a discussion of the world's first virtual millionaire to introduce students to the concept of paradigm shift. Students use Chung's success to anticipate other paradigm shifts that virtual worlds may bring to existing modalities.

Advertising in Virtual Worlds has students examine the use of virtual worlds as an advertising platform and decide which products are the most and least likely to be advertised in this new medium.

The Virtual Classroom asks students to estimate the impact of virtual learning in the future and compare its advantages and disadvantages relative to real-world learning. This activity also provides students with examples of educational applications of virtual worlds. Students discuss how the provided scenarios can be used to teach the subject matter. Students then develop additional scenarios of their own for each subject.

Pity the Griever provides students with the opportunity to investigate the causes and consequences of anti-social behavior, as it occurs in both virtual worlds and the real world.

Virtual Worlds and People with Disabilities has students construct an argument for how virtual worlds can benefit both participants with disabilities and those without disabilities.

Video Games & Virtual Worlds Buzz

THE WORD *VIRTUAL* MEANS something that is a constructed version of reality that has no physical state. In a **virtual world**, one can observe and function within an abstract virtual world, but cannot touch that world. Technically, virtual worlds are a type of video game. More specifically, they are an example of a **massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG)**. In many ways, they are the ultimate **sandbox game**. There are very few rules, players can come and go as they wish, and there is no clear “end” of the game.

The big difference between virtual worlds and video games is that participants in virtual worlds are not trying to “win.” Nor are they attempting to reach higher levels of the game or complete missions, as is common in the more conventional forms of MMORPGs. However, just as in real life, some participants in virtual worlds are more successful than others are. Success in virtual worlds can include financial success. Some people are earning a good deal of real money from their participation in virtual worlds. However, success can be measured in other ways, including the development of friendships, influencing the opinions of others, and expressing creativity.

Some of the best-known virtual worlds include *Active Worlds*, *There.com*, and *Club Penguin*. The most

popular virtual world is *Second Life*. In June 2008, *Second Life* reported nearly 15 million members from more than 100 countries. *Second Life* says that its members are online a total of 25 million hours a month. Clearly, there is something about virtual worlds that is attractive to many people. In this unit, we will investigate the causes of this attraction and see how people move back and forth between their real lives and their virtual lives.

Success in virtual worlds can include financial success.



The Virtual Classroom

TO ENCOURAGE THE USE of *Second Life* by schools and colleges, *Second Life* offers them a discount from its usual prices. It costs about \$1,000 for a school to buy a 16-acre virtual island, plus a monthly fee of about \$150. So far, more than 70 educational institutions have “campuses” in *Second Life*. More than 300 colleges have courses that use *Second Life* to teach students. Dozens of schools and universities participate in the Active Worlds Educational Universe, also at discounted prices (www.activeworlds.com/edu/awedu_participants.asp). Hundreds of high school teachers are also using virtual worlds to help students learn.

1. Do you think that virtual campuses will continue to grow in the future? Explain why or why not.
2. Do you think that virtual learning holds any advantages over real-world learning? If so, what do you think is the biggest advantage of virtual learning? Explain.
3. Are there disadvantages to virtual learning? If you think so, what do you think is the biggest disadvantage? Explain.
4. Do you think that you could successfully learn in a virtual school? Explain why or why not.

Activity 6: The Virtual Classroom *(continued)*

Some of the educational aspects of virtual worlds are easy to identify. For example, participating in a virtual world clearly requires computer skills. Designing clothing, personal items, houses, and so forth helps students develop their creative and spatial skills. Other educational opportunities also present themselves.

Suppose that your teacher has assigned you and your classmates to participate in a virtual world. Consider the following scenarios.

5. If you are male in the real world, your teacher assigns you to be female in the virtual world (or vice versa). Also, your teacher directs you to choose an ethnicity different from your real-world ethnicity.
 - The subject is social science. What sorts of things do you think you would learn if you had to make these changes? Explain.
 - What would be another way that you could use a virtual world to learn about social science? Explain.

6. You are assigned the virtual role of being the boss of several of your classmates. You are to direct your classmates to complete a task—for example, assembling a set of tables and chairs from different parts. All of your communication must be in writing, and your classmates are required to follow your written instructions.
 - The subject is English language arts. What sorts of things do you think you would learn if you were the boss who had to communicate in writing only?

Activity 6: The Virtual Classroom *(continued)*

- What would be another way that you could use a virtual world to learn English language arts? Explain.
7. You are assigned the role of owner of a virtual apartment building. You must develop a budget to build twelve apartments. The apartments have to be stylish enough to attract tenants. You also have to pay property taxes (which are based on a percentage of the apartments' value), utilities, trash collection, and general maintenance. You have to charge enough rent to pay your bills and also pay yourself a profit of 10 percent above your costs. If you charge too little for your apartments, you will not be able to pay your bills. If you charge too much for your apartments, nobody will want to live there.
- The subject is mathematics. What sorts of things do you think you would learn if you were the property owner? Explain.
- What would be another way that you could use a virtual world to learn mathematics? Explain.