Let's Play with Academia: Parasocial-Interaction-Informed Pedagogy for the Zoom Classroom

Gabriel Elvery

Extended Abstract

This paper proposes pedagogy for deploying the Let's Play format as part of online seminars in higher education. The technique is intended to enable practitioners to reap the benefits of using video games paired with the "think aloud" method to promote student engagement in Zoom classrooms and teach transferable critical analysis skills. Using a Let's Play format is designed to facilitate a gameplay viewing experience for students that guides oscillation between affective engagement and the process of critically analysing how the video game evoked this response. The research is informed by traditional pedagogy, Game Studies research and theories of parasociality. It is being trialled in an on-going small-scale qualitative study to test the efficacy of the proposed teaching techniques. The intended outcome of the research is to provide resources detailing a method for including video games in the online classroom in a way that will allow practitioners to do so without the support of an institutional infrastructure, and to explore how using parasocial interaction techniques utilised by Let's Play performers can create a more welcoming online teaching environment that encourages reciprocity between students and educators.

Awareness of the educational viability of commercial video games as teaching tools (Gee 2003; Lacasa, 2013) and objects of study (Buckingham and Burn, 2007) which can aid in the development of a plethora of soft skills (Barr, 2019) has become increasingly prominent in academic literature. However, the play and study of video games is still not a common occurrence in the classroom. This is due to the constraints of budget, availability of technology, and the technical skills of educators (Rice, 2007). The method I am proposing is intended to provide a solution for educators who have the skills and desire to include video games in their practice using freely available web conferencing technologies in combination with personally owned gaming software. A further circumstance that prompted the idea for this study was the COVID-19 pandemic, during which the benefits of video games to wellbeing were further recognised by researchers (Barr and Copeland-

Stewart, 2021). Furthermore, during this time, educators transitioned to teaching online largely without prior experience (McArthur, 2021). Although some teaching techniques can be replicated online, teaching on Zoom poses unique challenges, such as creating an environment in which students feel empowered to participate without being physically present in a classroom. This paper proposes that using techniques informed by gaming entertainers, who have built an online community by creating an engaging and interactive space using video gameplay, could enhance the atmosphere of the Zoom classroom.

Let's Plays are described by Smith et al. (2013) as "an episodic account of a player's journey through a particular game or creative play in a non-linear game" (p. 133): creators record themselves playing games and provide commentary ranging from analysis to one-sided informal chatter, which their viewers watch and can comment on. Recorded Let's Play videos still exist, but Let's Plays have also taken dynamic forms due to the growth of livestreaming on sites such as Twitch.TV, which in 2021 hosted an average of 105,000 streamers with an average of 2,788,000 concurrent viewers (twitchtracker.com). The transition from pre-recorded content to live streaming provides viewers access to content creators in real time, as "gathered audiences can simultaneously view the gameplay and engage interpersonally with the player, effectively playing the game together" (Lin et al, 2019, p. 3) via the chat function. There is debate regarding whether this activity is social or parasocial — research suggests it falls somewhere in between. This is best described by Kowert and Daniel (2021) as a "'one-and-a-half" way (rather than a traditional "one-way") parasocial relationship" (p. 2) as such interactions can vary "between direct social interaction and parasocial viewership and community affiliation" (p. 6).

While teaching is a more directly sociable interaction than streaming, especially for a recurring class in a physical classroom, the dynamic between student and teacher shares some similarities with that of streamer and viewer. Both student and viewer enter a space which has particular social cues, rules and etiquette that are distinct from that of a casual social encounter and

come to know and interact with, a specific version of the teacher, or performer. The educator also assumes responsibility for the social dynamics of the space, which includes maintaining the balance of projecting a personable (or at least competent) persona whilst upholding good boundaries to ensure the comfort and safety of those involved. When the classroom transitions into an online space, the communication between student and teacher becomes mediated by technology, which alters the dynamics of the class and may impact communication styles, inhibiting practitioners if they are not used to an online format. This mediation may also shift the relationship into one which is more parasocial if practitioners have not met their students in person and have missed small opportunities (such as engaging in casual conversation before, after and during class) to get to know their students in a social capacity. Therefore, understanding how to cultivate this more parasocial relationship (or "one and a half-sided parasocial relationship") may help improve the distanced teaching and learning experience whilst employing the added benefits that video games offer as both teaching tools and social lubrication.

Whether social or parasocial, techniques used by streamers to engage viewers can inform teaching – especially as the commentary on many Let's Play videos and gaming streams can take the form of a more informal, but comparable practice, to the "think aloud" technique. The "think aloud" technique is a recent iteration of Bruner's (1978) scaffolding which, rather than guiding students through specific tasks, guides them through the process of thinking. Linkon (2011) describes the process as "as an effort to remind students that the seemingly intuitive, magical process of figuring out how to begin interpreting a text actually involves some fairly clear and specific analytical strategies" (p. 53). As observed by Taylor (2018), the "think aloud" technique is already being used by Let's Play creators and although this is generally not for educational purposes, there is much overlap, as this form of narration "makes external that which would normally only be "in [the creators'] head", but during a Let's Play this commentary is "typically accompanied with humor, frustration, and suspense" (p. 75). My workshop format uses both the entertainment and critical elements of the "think aloud" technique, in the style of a Let's Play, to model and teach these critical

analysis skills to students. The intention is to include elements of entertainment to facilitate an affective experience of the game, whilst injecting moments of reflection to allow for the development of critical thinking.

This paper will outline the theory and method of the qualitative study used to test a proposed seminar structure whilst presenting an honest account of its limitations and the difficulties involved in implementing it. The intended outcome of the study itself is to provide usable resources for educators, whilst highlighting the power of video games as media and social spaces in the service of more effective educational interactions.

References

Barr, M. (2019). *Graduate Skills and Game-Based Learning: Using Video Games for Employability in Higher Education*. Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27786-4

Barr, M., & Copeland-Stewart, A. (2022). Playing Video Games During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Effects on Players' Well-Being. *Games and Culture*, 17(1), 122–139. https://doi.org/10.1177/15554120211017036

Bruner, J. S. (1978). The role of dialogue in language acquisition. In A. Sinclair, R., J. Jarvelle, and W. J.M. Levelt (Eds.) *The Child's Concept of Language* (pp. 241-256). Springer-Verlag.

Buckingham, D., & Burn, A. (2007). Game Literacy in Theory and Practice. *J. of Educ. Multimedia and Hypermedia*, *16*.

Gee, J. P. (2003). *What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Kowert, R., & Daniel, E. (2021). The one-and-a-half sided parasocial relationship: The curious case of live streaming. *Computers in Human Behavior Reports*, *4*, 100150.

Lacasa, P. (2013). *Learning in Real and Virtual Worlds: Commercial Video Games as Educational Tools*. Palgrave Macmillan US. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137312051

Linkon, S. L. (2011). *Literary Learning: Teaching the English Major*. Indiana University Press.

Taylor, T. L. (2018). *Watch me play: Twitch and the rise of game live streaming*. Princeton University Press.

McArthur, J. A. (2021). From classroom to Zoom room: Exploring instructor modifications of visual nonverbal behaviors in synchronous online classrooms. Communication Teacher, 1–12.

Rice, J. W. (2007). New Media Resistance: Barriers to Implementation of Computer Video Games in the Classroom. *Journal of Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia*, *16*(3), 249–261.

Smith, T., Obrist, M., & Wright, P. (2013). Live-streaming changes the (video) game. *Proceedings of the 11th European Conference on Interactive TV and Video*, 131–138. https://doi.org/10.1145/2465958.2465971

Twitch Statistics and Charts. (n.d.). *Twitch Tracker* Retrieved June 6, 2022 from https://twitchtracker.com/statistics