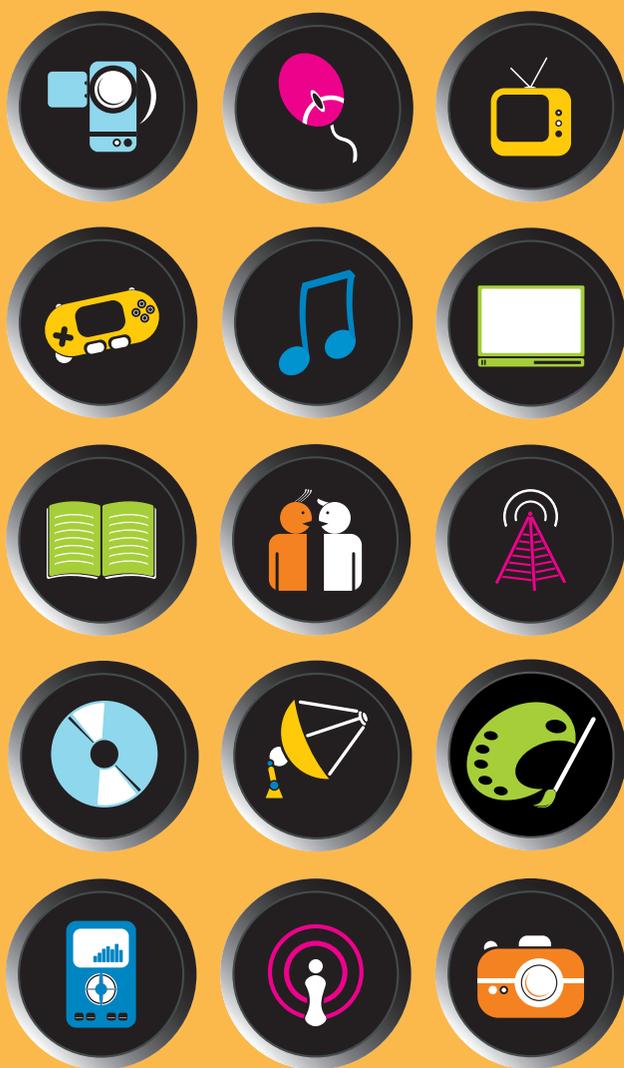


Lesson Plans for Creating MEDIA-RICH CLASSROOMS



Photography
Television/Film/Video
Multimedia
Video Games
Magazines/Print Media
Graphic Novels
Popular Music
Advertising

Edited by
Mary T. Christel
Scott Sullivan

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19 Video Game Vigilance: Applying Critical Thinking to Video Games

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Context

As a doctoral student of communication at the University of Massachusetts, I have developed a passion for media literacy, particularly in the area of youth and video games. In an effort to extend my interest in and research on this topic beyond university walls, I developed and facilitated a media literacy lesson plan in approximately ten sixth- and seventh-grade language arts and social studies classrooms in eastern Massachusetts. Most of the classrooms were located in urban elementary schools with students from diverse racial backgrounds and lower socioeconomic neighborhoods. After speaking with several teachers and a guidance counselor about their concern over video games, I created this lesson plan with a focus on portrayals of violence and gender in video game content.

Rationale

The popularity of video game use among young people has soared to new heights in recent years. In fact, a 1999 report by the Kaiser Family Foundation (Roberts, Foehr, Rideout, and Brodie) indicates that 39 percent of eight- to eighteen-year-olds engage in video game use on any given day—and this figure continues to grow. While video games are a source of enjoyment for many young people, the content of these games is often a cause of concern for parents and educators because of the prevalence of violence and problematic gender portrayals featured in the games. Given the centrality of video games in the lives of young people, coupled with the issues that arise in video game content, the following lesson plan and activities are designed to inspire critical think-

ing about video games and foster responsible video game use among young players. This lesson plan is a strong fit with language arts and social studies curricula because the subject matter provides ample opportunity for critical thinking exercises, writing assignments, and other creative projects. Furthermore, based on my experience with facilitating this lesson plan, I have found that students are eager to express their thoughts on the positive and negative attributes of video games. Indeed, video games play a significant role in young people's lives, and this timely topic is sure to spark important conversations in any classroom.

The choice to use video game advertisements in magazines rather than actual video games is driven by a number of motivating factors. First, the sizable cost of a console and game cartridges may prohibit some teachers from doing a game analysis; video game magazines, which often feature still images drawn straight from video games themselves, are a useful alternative at a fraction of the cost. The second advantage of using video game advertisements is that students are able to engage in an in-depth analysis of still images rather than being distracted by the quick pace and competitive nature of playing a game. Third, an analysis of video game magazines allows students to gain a better understanding of the general content patterns of a wide range of video games currently on the market, especially since the average game magazine features dozens of game ads; meanwhile, due to financial considerations and time restraints, it is unlikely that most teachers will be able to have students examine several actual games. A final benefit to examining game advertisements is that teachers have the advantage of knowing the exact material to which their students will be exposed; this may not be the case with a video game, especially given the wealth of options and scenarios that modern games present to players.

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Analyze violence and gender roles portrayed in video games and consider the implications of such images
- Consider the positive and negative aspects of video games
- Learn about the video game ratings system
- Use creativity to design an educational and/or pro-social video game

NCTE/IRA standards addressed: 1, 3, 6, 11, 12

Materials/Preactivity Preparation

Although the lesson plan focuses on video games, one easy way to analyze game content without setting up a gaming console in the classroom is to use video game magazines (e.g., *Game Informer*, *Electronic Gaming Monthly*, *GamePro*, etc.), which feature countless ads, stories, and pictures taken directly from video game content. These magazines are available at most bookstores and magazine shops. Four or five magazines for a class of twenty students is ideal.

If teachers are unfamiliar with video games, I recommend that they secure a copy of the educational video *Game Over: Gender, Race, and Violence in Video Games*. Produced by the Media Education Foundation, this 41-minute video provides a thorough account of the presence and potential implications of violence and gender-stereotyped images in video games. *Game Over* provides a useful lens through which teachers can learn more about video games prior to facilitating this lesson plan with students. Note: After previewing *Game Over*, teachers can decide if they want to show the video (or portions of it) in class; however, having students watch the video is not a prerequisite of the following lesson plan and activities.

Time Frame

This is a three-part lesson plan; accordingly, teachers should allow for three class periods (approximately 50- 60-minute time blocks) to facilitate the three parts.

Description of Activity

Day 1: Facts and Figures, Pros and Cons

The first session includes two main activities, Part A and Part B. Part A offers an overview of video games, introducing students to some key facts regarding the history of video games, as well as figures pertaining to the use and content of the games. I generally distribute to students a handout (see Figure 19.1, Part A on the companion disk) that offers five pertinent facts and figures and then poses a discussion question(s) relevant to the information. For instance, I inform students that video games were first created in the 1970s and that the first game on the market was called Pong. I then pose the question: "In what ways do you think video games have changed in the last thirty years?" I allot approximately 30 minutes for Part A. In Part B (also about 30 minutes long), I ask students to create a list (using Part B of Figure 19.1) of posi-

tive and negative aspects of video games. Students share their list with the class, and then I ask the class to consider why it is important to think about both the positive and the negative aspects of video games. I usually end class by reminding students that successful critical thinking requires us to consider both the negative and the positive aspects of media, and that we can indeed be critical of media that we engage in and enjoy.

Day 2: An Analysis of Video Game Images

The second session requires students to analyze the images found in video game magazines. As previously noted, these magazines are a good substitute for the games themselves, as many of the images found in the magazines are taken straight from game content. Teachers should divide their classroom into groups of four or five students. Each group is given a video game magazine to examine for 20 minutes. Generally, I ask students to pay special attention to the following:

1. The number of times they see acts of violence (punching, shooting, kicking, etc.) and weapons (guns, knives, etc.) in the magazines.
2. The way in which men are portrayed as “hypermasculine” (i.e., males featured as violent, dangerous, macho, and superior to women).
3. The way in which females are featured. For instance, in general, are the female characters seen as weak or strong, heroes or villains? Also, I ask students to note how the female characters are dressed.

Finally, ask each group to select one image from the magazine that they found particularly disturbing or offensive in regard to the manner in which violence or gender (or both) was depicted. (Each group will later share their selection with the class during the final 15–20 minutes of class.)

Once students have finished examining the magazines, teachers should initiate a class discussion. Following is a list of questions aimed at helping teachers facilitate class discussion. Teachers need not pose every question, instead asking those they feel are relevant to their particular class.

Discussion Questions

- In general, how are males portrayed in the magazines? How are females portrayed in the magazines? Are the differences between male and female portrayals significant?
-

- Do you consider video game characters to be stereotyped? Why do you think male and female characters are presented in such a manner? Do you think representations of gender in video games have changed over the years? Do you see any signs of improvement in how men and women are portrayed in the games you play?
- How often are images of violence found in the video game magazines? Are these images similar to those you see in the video games you play? Why do you think that video game designers include so much violence in video games?
- Do you think that the violence in video games teaches young players that aggression is acceptable? Do you think that excessive time spent with violent video games may desensitize players to real-world violence? Do you think that excessive exposure to violent video games may lead people to behave or think in an aggressive manner?
- How are violence and gender associated in video games? How might the connections between violence and gender be dangerous or problematic for those exposed to video games?

To expand and sustain this discussion, ask students during the last 15 to 20 minutes of class to present the image that their group selected while examining the video game magazines. Ask each group to discuss the image in relation to the factors listed earlier (violence, weapons, gender roles, etc.). What do the students find particularly problematic about the image they selected? What message does the image send to players? Finally, ask each group how they would change the image if they could do so.

Day 3: Video Game Ratings—Is “E” Really for Everyone?

The third session requires students to consider the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system used to rate video game content. Teachers should distribute Figure 19.2 (“Video Game Ratings: Is “E” Really for Everyone?” on the companion disk) to students. I recommend spending 15 to 20 minutes discussing the various ratings (e.g., EC, E, T, M, A, and RP). I also ask students to offer examples of various games that correspond to each of the given ratings. Next, it is useful to delve into a discussion about the ratings. Below is a list of questions that teachers can draw from to facilitate fruitful discussion:

Discussion Questions

- When selecting video games to purchase and/or play, do you pay attention to the ratings? Why or why not? Do your parents pay attention?
-

- Do you think that the ESRB ratings are effective? Are they necessary?
- Do you think that E-rated games are for “everyone,” as implied by the ESRB ratings system? Can you think of any E-rated games that might be inappropriate for a younger audience? If you could change anything about the ESRB ratings system, what would it be?
- Do you know of anyone under the age of seventeen who has been able to purchase an M-rated game? To what extent should stores be penalized for selling M-rated games to minors?

After the discussion, teachers might want to recap the most important points brought up during the three lesson plans. Teachers should also remind students that critically examining media messages is an important part of being “media literate” and that part of being a responsible and informed player of video games requires us to be critical consumers. I recommend ending the session by telling students that they represent the media makers of tomorrow. To prepare students for the future, and to inspire creative thinking, teachers might choose to assign a capstone project (see Figure 19.3 on the companion disk).

Capstone Activity

As a final activity, I recommend requiring students to create an educational and/or pro-social video game that addresses some of the problematic characteristics of most video games currently on the market. Students should “think outside of the box” to develop a game premise that is fun, innovative, and creative (see Figure 19.3, “Creating Your Own Video Game”). In the past, I have required students to write up their design in a booklet that offers a summary of their proposed game idea, descriptions and sketches of all main characters, a description of the game’s setting(s), a detailed account of the game’s rules and objectives, and a print advertisement for the proposed game. I suggest allowing students one week to complete this activity as a homework assignment; however, I do recommend allotting some time in class for brainstorming preliminary ideas in small groups. If time permits, have students pitch their ideas to the class. This activity is a fun, creative, and interesting way to complete a section on video games.

Assessment

Assessment of students’ understanding and critique of video game content can be made through class discussion, group exercises, and written responses to the select questions (like those listed above). Students’

performance on the capstone activity (the video game proposal booklet) should also be assessed; recommended grading criteria include the extent of creative thinking, strength of writing, and inclusion of all required components in the booklet (i.e., items 1–6, as described in Figure 19.3).

If time permits, teachers could also involve their classroom in a letter-writing activity in which students have the opportunity to voice their concerns and ideas to video game manufacturers. (Note: The names and addresses of video game manufacturers are easily obtainable online.)

Connections and Adaptations

This approach to examining and critiquing video games can be applied to different media (e.g., television, film, music lyrics). Also, these activities are easily adaptable to high school students. For instance, as an extension to this lesson plan and activities, high school students would be well equipped to take a closer look at attempts by legislators to regulate video games, as well as the implications of such regulatory actions. In addition, high school teachers could assign their students to examine and analyze various academic studies that have been published on video games. High school students could also examine the international nature of the video game industry and the role of video games in the global economy.

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Figure 19.1. An Overview of Video Games

Part A: Did You Know . . . ?

- The first video game (named Pong) was created in the 1970s.
Question: In what ways do you think video games have changed in the last 30 years?

- Almost 70 percent of homes with children own a video game system (like X-Box or Sega), and one-third of young people have a game system in their bedroom.
Questions: How many of you have video games at home? How many of you have game systems in your bedroom? How does having a game system affect your life?

- Nearly 10 billion dollars was spent in 2004 on video games and consoles.
Question: Why do you think video games have gotten so popular in the last few years?

- Nine out of ten of the top-selling video games feature violence.
Questions: Do you notice a lot of violence in the video games that you play, and do you think that the violence is excessive?

- About 64 percent of video game characters are male, and only 17 percent of video game characters are female (the other 19 percent of characters are nonhuman).
Questions: How are male characters usually portrayed in video games? How are the females usually depicted? Do you think these portrayals are fair and accurate?

Part B: Comparing the Positive and the Negative Aspects of Video Games

Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects

Question: Why do you think it might be important to consider both the positive and the negative aspects of video games?

Figure 19.2. Video Game Ratings: Is “E” Really for Everyone?

Most of the major video game makers use the Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) system to rate their games. This rating system was established in 1994, and most games display a rating on the video game package. A video game is given a rating based on the levels of violence, language, and other themes in the content.



EARLY CHILDHOOD

“EC”-rated games are OK for children ages 3 and over. They contain no material that parents would find inappropriate.



EVERYONE

“E”-rated games are OK for people ages 6 and older. “E”-rated games may contain low levels of cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence and/or mild language.



EVERYONE 10+

“E10+” games may be suitable for ages 10 and older. Titles in this category may contain more cartoon, fantasy, or mild violence, mild language, and/or minimal suggestive themes.



TEEN

Titles rated “T” have content that may be suitable for ages 13 and older. Titles in this category may contain violence, suggestive themes, crude humor, minimal blood, and/or infrequent use of strong language.



MATURE

“M”-rated games are intended (or made for) people ages 17+. These games may show more intense violence or language than other video games, and may also show more adult themes.



ADULTS ONLY

Titles rated “AO” have content suitable only for adults. Titles in this category may include graphic depictions of violence and other adult material. AO products are not intended for persons under the age of 18.



RATING PENDING

“RP” means that a new video game is waiting to receive a rating from ESRB. The RP symbol appears only in advertising prior to a game’s release.

Figure 19.3. Creating Your Own Video Game

Instructions

Imagine that you've been asked by a leading video game producer to create a new educational and/or pro-social video game. The video game producer is sick and tired of producing the same type of game—the shoot 'em ups, the war-themed games, and that sort of thing. However, the staff members at the video game production company are having trouble coming up with new and original ideas, which is why they're coming to you for suggestions. Your job, then, is to design a new video game idea and put those ideas on paper in the form of a proposal booklet. Your booklet should include the following six items:

1. A **cover page** that includes a catchy and appropriate title for your game, as well as an illustration.
2. A page titled **"Game Introduction and Summary"** where you will briefly describe your proposed game. You should describe how your game fits the proposed criteria of being innovative and educational and/or pro-social. Also, let the reader know what age group your game is targeting.
3. A page titled **"Game Characters"** where you will provide names, descriptions, and sketches of the main characters found in your game.
4. A page titled **"Game Settings"** where you will describe and illustrate the primary setting(s) of your game.
5. A page titled **"Game Rules"** where you will write a set of rules and objectives for your video game. For example, let's say your video game is based on the player building a successful theme park. You might decide that the player earns points every time a customer takes a ride on a certain attraction; however, the player might lose points when customers criticize the cost of the admission ticket. The player "wins" the game by creating a theme park that attracts virtual customers and earns a profit.
6. Finally, a **one-page advertisement** where your goal is to attract potential players to your game. You will want to include the game's title, an advertising slogan, and some illustrations.

You will have one week to complete this graded assignment as part of your homework, although some class time will be used for the initial brainstorming of potential ideas. Your proposal booklet will be evaluated in terms of creativity, strength of writing, and inclusion of all required components (e.g., items 1–6, as listed above). Good luck and have fun with this assignment!

Lesson Plans for Creating MEDIA-RICH CLASSROOMS



In today's media-rich society, where students are exposed to an ever-increasing variety of traditional and nonprint texts, media literacy skills have become critical to the academic development of our students. By developing students' media literacy skills, not only can we help them to become more sophisticated readers and consumers of media, but we can also help to increase their involvement and literacy skills in other areas.



Whether you are just starting to introduce your students to media literacy or are simply looking for new ideas to revitalize your curriculum, the 27 field-tested lessons in *Lesson Plans for Creating Media-Rich Classrooms* will help you to integrate a variety of media literacy concepts and skills into existing curricula. Each lesson follows a standard format and includes a rationale, a description of the activity, assessment suggestions, and connections and adaptations of the individual lesson to larger curriculum contexts and other commonly used texts. Contributors also connect their lessons to a set of objectives and to the NCTE/IRA standards. Specific lessons include



- Manipulating photos for specific effect
- Composing with images and with video diaries
- Pairing film and print texts in literature study
- Using storyboards and basic cinematic techniques to visualize literary texts
- Creating video games as a tool for in-depth plot analysis
- Analyzing the music industry through an exercise in artist promotion
- Exploring the use of the video news release in local and national news broadcasts
- Detecting bias in print and broadcast news



A companion disk features over 50 files that include student handouts, resources for teachers, and sample media files.

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