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Game Changers: Making New Meanings and New Media with Video Games

Over the past year, I have spent many hours talking with young people about digital media. In focus groups and interviews, we have discussed their media consumption and production, with a particular focus on remixed digital texts. I entered these dialogues expecting to hear about remix genres such as fan fiction, musical mash-ups, fan videos, and machinima. But surprisingly, the genre that has come up most frequently is the Let’s Play video. What exactly is a Let’s Play video? I asked participants the first time the phrase was used. I had only a vague sense it had something to do with video games. And then, after they explained, I had a rush of questions: How are they made? Where do you watch them? Why do you watch them? And what makes them so interesting?

It turns out these young people have introduced me not only to a unique hybrid of digital gameplay and video but also to one of the most popular forms of online digital entertainment. Currently, more than 50 of the top 100 YouTube channels feature gameplay, a popularity largely fuelled by young audiences. Let’s Play videos (often known simply as LPs) typically include gameplay footage accompanied by simultaneous commentary recorded by the player. That commentary may be audio recorded or, occasionally, video recorded to capture the player’s emotional and physical reactions. (See Figure 1.) To watch an LP is, essentially, to watch another person play a video game.

Let’s Play videos are as diverse as games themselves. An LP may promote, review, satirize, or narrate a game. An LP creator may demonstrate how to play a game expertly, or, for the sake of humor, may play in a comical or counterintuitive way. The content of LP commentaries is equally broad and may include praise, critique, recommendations, exclamations, questions, instructions, shouts, sighs, whispers, and groans. While early LPs were often created to draw attention to independent games, LPs now span a range of genres (e.g., shooter, role-playing, action, and sandbox games) and include titles from independent and mainstream game publishers. Perhaps the single thread that holds together these diverse texts is the particular ethos of the LP community, a community that values creators who are personal and interactive, engaging in dialogue with their viewers and encouraging sociability in their audience.

Another notable feature of the LP is the profit and fame it can generate for its (usually young)
producers. While the vast majority of LP creators do not see any revenue, a small handful have made huge profits. In 2014, for example, the 24-year-old Swedish gamer Felix Arvid Ulf Kjellberg (known as PewDiePie) was reported to have earned more than $7 million from his Let’s Play YouTube channel (Schiesser). Indeed, some LP creators like PewDiePie have become online personalities in their own right, with huge audiences and well-organized fan groups.

Let’s Play videos have recently received a great deal of media attention, mostly focused on the popularity of the genre and the profits being made. “This Guy Makes Millions Playing Video Games on YouTube” reads a headline in The Atlantic (Zoia), while a Guardian headline describes Let’s Play videos as “The YouTube Phenomenon That’s Bigger than One Direction” (McConnell). But the youth I spoke with suggest there’s more to LPs than their popularity and profitability. Many of them expressed a philosophical interest in issues raised by the LP’s unique origins. “Do people get the same sort of experience from watching a game over Let’s Plays as they do from actually playing it?” mused one participant. “A video isn’t a game. It’s very different from the experience of real play.” Another participant argued that “appropriation is the way people create things. Nobody would be making Let’s Plays without the original game. That doesn’t mean it’s any less unique or creative.” Another student ventured that many young people watched LPs to learn how to be better game players. It was these kinds of observations that inspired me to begin my own investigation of LP videos and practices, with the thought that they might be sites that are not only important for youth but also potentially interesting for educators.

Recent scholarship has demonstrated that video games can play a positive role in literacy and learning in and outside of the classroom. One important strand of this scholarship examines what game theorist Mia Consalvo calls “gaming paratexts”—that is, the texts and practices that surround games, such as game reviews, online forums, FAQs, and fan art. Consalvo argues that these paratexts have unique “pedagogical functions” (22), for it is through paratexts that gamers learn how to play, appraise, and think about games. A small but increasing number of scholars have focused their attention on the pedagogical possibilities of paratexts, including cheat sites (Fields and Kafai), walkthroughs (Rowsell et al.), and game-inspired fan fiction (Gerber and Price). Paratexts appear to be a particularly fruitful site of inquiry into the place of video games in the English classroom. As Thomas Apperley and Catherine Beavis have shown, they shift the emphasis away from the sometimes mechanical process of playing games and toward the “contemplative, creative, imaginative and productive elements of digital gameplay” (134).

As a relatively new kind of paratext, the Let’s Play video has so far received little recognition from educational researchers. Yet as the young people I spoke with suggested, LPs are engaging sites of creative learning. In this article, I take that suggestion seriously, exploring how LP videos and the varied practices of spectatorship and production they involve might inform literacy instruction. This could mean using LPs as sources of insight into youth culture, as models for media production, and in some cases, as texts to be integrated into English curricula. In the pages to follow, I outline three ways that English teachers and their students might engage with this emerging genre.

Analyzing and Making Meaning from Games

One of the most fascinating aspects of Let’s Play videos is that they reveal how players create meaning from games. Through the combination of action and oral commentary, viewers come to understand how players play a game and, simultaneously, what they think, feel, and know about a game. Watching another person play a game reinforces the idea that meanings are constructed rather than intrinsic. As literacy theorist James Paul Gee writes, we see that within games, “the meaning of any event, object, artifact, conversation, written note or any other potentially meaningful sign is up for grabs” (84). We also see the messy and shifting nature of meaning-making as we watch (and listen to) players continuously revise their understanding of a game in response to complex semiotic, social, contextual, and gestural clues.
This meaning-making activity is evident in just about any Let’s Play video. To illustrate, we might look briefly at an LP made by the British player Zoey using the acclaimed game Gone Home. Zoey, a young LP producer with a loyal following of 450,000 subscribers, is known for her cheerful and personal commentary; Gone Home, a first-person exploration game featuring a teenaged female protagonist, has been lauded by New York Times video game critic Chris Suellentrop as “the greatest video game love story ever told.” In the first minute of her LP, Zoey informs her audience that she’s playing Gone Home for the first time. As she plays, the audience watches her learn to navigate the game, which consists of exploring an abandoned house to solve a mystery. Zoey poses questions throughout the first half of the game: “Why do we have an obituary in this drawer?” “Maybe that’s the girl in the photo?” “Can I interact with that?” Slowly, Zoey’s questions turn into explanations as she begins to grasp the game’s purpose and the actions required to solve its mystery. By the end of the game, she is able to offer her interpretation of the story’s ending as well as reflections on its emotional impact. The YouTube comments discussing Zoey’s LP make it clear that the viewers, too, understand the LP as a site for making and sharing meaning, as commenters gently push Zoey toward new understandings of the game’s narrative and share their reactions to the game’s ending (see Figure 2).

FIGURE 2. YouTube comments on Zoey’s Let’s Play video for Gone Home

12 years ago

This series continues to be awesome, Zoey!

There is, however, something you’ve missed. Not an object, but a connection between some things we have seen already. I wouldn’t want to spoil it by spelling it out directly, but it’s pretty key to the “other story” of Gone Home, so I’ll try to vaguely gesture in its general direction.

(Hopefully vague) spoilers below!

The connection is to do with the nature of Oscar’s “Transgression” mentioned in the letter in the safe.

There’s a couple of things in the area near the safe that gives hints to what happened (one thing that you saw in the last episode, another that you found in this one), so take a look around there.

You might also want to think about the year that Oscar Masan sold his pharmacy and shut himself off from the world. A very significant year.

OK, hopefully that’s enough vague hinting without spoiling anything!

Show less

Reply • 2

2 years ago

I’m . . . actually not sure I like that ending. It’s very over-the-top romantic, which is actually what was needed for this. But it’s a little unnerving how being so selfish is considered romantic. Sam basically just ran away from any problems her parents might have with her and Lonnie, and in the process also stole a bunch of stuff in the process. Unless Sam thinks she’s going to be disowned anyways, the ending just seems to me like the rest of the family will break apart. The parents are already on rocky footing, and this will add another wedge.

BTW, I don’t mean for this to diminish the ending for anybody. I’m just putting it out there why this ending made me uneasy.

Show less

Reply • 2
conversations demonstrate the affective and collective nature of meaning-making, highlighting the way that paratexts frequently involve players in productive social interactions.

So what does this flurry of interpretive activity mean for English teachers? To begin, it points toward the potential of many games to be played and understood in multiple ways. As Suellentrop writes in relation to Gone Home, “video games are as flexible a creative form as any other,” an insight that can easily be lost in the panic over the violent content of some games. But there is something even more noteworthy here. A Pew Internet study (Lenhart et al.) revealed that 97 percent of American teens play video games. What the popularity of Let’s Play videos makes clear is that teens don’t only want to play video games, they want to participate in significant conversations around their meaning. LP videos have the potential to spark those conversations, opening the door to questions such as, How do you play and understand this game? How do others play and understand it? And how can we account for the differences? An exercise as simple as inviting students to compare LPs of the same game created by two different players can help them to recognize meaning in games as complex, constructed, and context-specific, and lead to reflection on their own processes of interpretation.

Let’s Play videos also open a door to considering not only how meanings are created in games but also how they are circulated. Indeed, on platforms such as YouTube these two activities become blurred, as conventional notions of “publishing” a text give way to mass participation (Lankshear and Knobel). To have videos noticed and shared, LP producers must understand how digital texts circulate. This requires an in-depth knowledge of technology, networks, and audiences. On YouTube, for example, this means knowing how videos are displayed and recommended via the site’s algorithms, identifying which game genres and commentary styles garner the most views, and understanding how to draw attention to LPs through the use of other sites such as Facebook, Twitch, or Twitter. Students and teachers can investigate these new considerations in the production and circulation of digital texts by tracing the movement of a single LP across multiple platforms, or by identifying common features of the most widely viewed and shared LPs.

In addition to revealing the complexity of meaning-making and circulation in digital spaces, LPs also offer opportunities for analysis of specific games. By removing the interactivity that makes the experience of gameplay so compelling, LPs provide a distance that promotes thoughtful reflection on games and gameplay. Image, action, conflict, and narrative all come more clearly into view. On platforms such as YouTube where LPs are prerecorded, videos can easily be viewed, reviewed, and analyzed. Games in this form can be more readily understood as cultural artifacts that are as worthy of close analysis as novels, poems, plays, or films. Looking at games’ representations (for example, of race or gender), their way of positioning players (from first-person or third-person perspectives), and the kinds of actions they invite (such as building, destroying, or discovering), students can begin to uncover games’ underlying ideologies, worldviews, and values that often go unnoticed in the rush of gameplay. The added layer of commentary provided by the player can serve as a helpful entry point to such analysis, while the thoughtful discussions that surround many LPs can serve as models for the type of peer feedback we want to generate in our classrooms.

Creating Remixed Media

Beyond media analysis, there has also been a growing emphasis on digital media production in English classrooms in recent years. Educators recognize that student participation in media creation supports digital and traditional literacies, leads to more critical awareness of media texts, and provides opportunities for youth to enter their experiences, opinions, and concerns into the public sphere. The advantages of media production do not apply only to the creation of “original” texts such as documentaries or podcasts. Increasingly, we are coming to
understand the pedagogical potential of using and creating remixed texts in the classroom (Burwell). Remix genres such as fan fiction, musical mash-ups, or Let’s Play videos are now a significant mode of cultural production. Many such remixes provide critiques, counternarratives, or imaginative reinterpretations of pop culture texts. Far from being imitative, remixes provide unique opportunities for youth to experiment with contemporary media genres and to “talk back” to the popular media that play such a large role in their lives.

Certainly these kinds of opportunities are available with the production of LPs. Making an LP means learning the technical skills required to play a game, record gameplay, edit video, and upload to an external site. It means approaching video games with a critical mindset and being able to pose relevant questions about game design, structure, narrative, aesthetics, and action—and how all of these elements interact in the dynamic meaning-making systems of games. It also means understanding the social nature of LP culture and responding to viewers’ desire to share and discuss experiences of games with other players who are passionate about the medium.

Beyond supporting these digital literacies, the production of LPs can also aid the development of more conventional academic literacies. LP producers must decide, for example, whether their video is meant to instruct other players, provide first impressions, or parody a game genre. They must consider who they want to view their video and how they will appeal to these viewers. Such decisions about purpose, audience, and ethos are reflected in choices around narration, tone, persona, and dramatic expression. These are exactly the kinds of stylistic choices that are made regularly in composing and performing written and oral texts in an English classroom. In this way, Let’s Play videos, like other paratexts, provide an effective bridge between traditional and game literacies (Apperley and Beavis 134).

Making full-length LPs in a classroom setting would be a daunting task, especially given the hours-long playing time of many games. However, the LP format can be easily adapted into achievable classroom projects. One possibility lies in having students record and comment on a small portion of a game, for example, a five-minute clip that presents a crucial interaction, challenge, or design feature. Another possibility draws from the history of the LP. Before video recording of gameplay was possible, game enthusiasts made LPs by taking screenshots (which requires only a simple keyboard command) and accompanying these with written commentary. This is a task that could be accomplished in classrooms with minimal computer equipment, and one that fosters a more contemplative form of written commentary. Variations on these projects are possible depending on the time, technology, and expertise available: slide shows with screen shots and recorded audio are possible, for example, as are videos made using students’ mobile phones. In each case, the key is to encourage students to experiment with LP production as a way to inquire deeply into questions about games, audiences, and compositional choices.

**Asking Critical Questions about Digital Power**

Finally, LP videos provide an excellent starting place for critical conversations about games and the game industry. Critical literacy requires that young people be invited to participate in serious conversations about power in a variety of texts and contexts. These conversations are especially meaningful when they focus on the pop culture sites where so many young people invest their attention. Classroom conversations about popular digital media not only help adolescents develop a critical stance but also convey the message that their everyday media practices play a crucial role in shaping contemporary culture.

LPs prompt significant questions related to power in digital spaces. One way to begin discussion might consist of posing questions about the LP’s meteoric rise in popularity. What is it that makes LPs so popular—and so profitable? Where do those profits go? And why have a handful of LP producers acquired fame and fortune, when others have not? While such questions might seem hard to tackle (especially for those with little experience with games), educators should take heart at the number of accessible online resources that address the LP phenomenon. Many of these approach games...
with passion, wit, and a critical outlook (see Figure 3). PBS’s six-minute video “Why Is Let’s Play So Huge?” is a good example. In it, host Jamin Warren investigates the popularity of the genre, referencing the history of video games and exploring the new sense of community created through LPs. The gaming website Gamasutra provides equally important insight into Let’s Play profits with a detailed study that investigates how many LP producers accept money from game developers (Rose). The study frames the issue as an ethical one, asking LP producers if it is appropriate to accept “pay for play.” Together, the video and the report provide plenty of material for thought-provoking discussions about the stereotype of the lonely gamer, the rising power of amateur media producers, and the ethics of profit and promotion in the gaming industry.

Another set of related questions might be asked about practices of appropriation. Indeed, the thorniest questions posed by Let’s Play videos are rooted in their status as remixed texts, that is, as texts that reuse cultural properties owned by someone else. Given games’ unique interactive properties, LPs represent an especially complex form of remix. Although games themselves are not copyrightable, their underlying source code and audiovisual components are. LPs reproduce these audiovisuals, sometimes in their entirety. But there are also distinct differences. Games become video, and the player contributes both gameplay and commentary, substantially altering the original game. In fact, most legal experts suggest that LPs do not infringe copyright laws, although their legal status has yet to be determined in court (Taylor). The grey area occupied by LPs, then, means that they make excellent case studies for discussion of copyright. Watching LPs together, students and teachers can engage in conversations about the ethics and effects of appropriation and the concept of “fair use”—the right to use, transform, and critique cultural materials. Questions addressed to specific LPs could include the following:

- Do you think the LP transforms the original game? Why or why not?
- How might the game developers and publishers be affected by this appropriation?
- Do you think an LP producer has any ethical responsibilities to the original creators of the game?

In a context in which young people are not only consumers of remixed media but quite often their creators, the opportunity to discuss questions of profit, promotion, and intellectual property is an increasingly relevant component of critical literacy.

Conclusion

Game theorist James Newman writes that Let’s Play videos give us unique insight into the gaming “performances, observations and techniques of others” (62). Young people’s eagerness to watch, make, and discuss LPs suggests a hunger to communicate with others about an activity that is central to their lives. Whether they are silly or serious, profound or profane, Let’s Play videos are flooding the Internet with conversations about the meaning of games. The English classroom can’t replace this outpouring of interpretation, nor should it. But as English educators committed to critical literacy, what we can
do is work with students to explore, interrogate, and enter into those conversations. The Let’s Play video extends a playful invitation to commentary, creativity, and critique. Who are we to pass that up?

Works Cited


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While students interact with a range of print, visual, and sound texts, they do not always recognize that these many documents are texts. By creating an inventory of personal texts, students begin to consciously recognize the many literacy demands in contemporary society. Students begin by brainstorming a list of items that combine different ways of expressing ideas, such as a poster or DVD. After the lists are shared, list items are identified as texts (audio texts, video texts, etc.). Students then create an inventory of significant texts that they have engaged with over a specified period of time, and discuss why it is important to interact with a variety of different types of texts. With this start, they create a working definition of literacy that they refine and explore as they continue their investigation of the texts that they interact with at home, at school, and in other settings. http://bit.ly/2mK8D6f