

Pedagogue Bonus: Gaming in the Writing Classroom (w/Emma Kostopolus)

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue Bonus, a short episode that covers a single topic or question. I'm your host Shane Wood.

I'm going to start by reading a passage from a 2009 article from Jonathan Alexander in the journal of *College Composition and Communication* about the richness of gaming and including gaming in the writing classroom as a means for developing reading, writing, and critical thinking. Alexander writes, "At the most basic level, gaming involves complex use of multiple modes of writing and a need to develop a sense of how text and visuals interact. Many games provide a rich environment in which gamers are developing and (pardon the pun) playing with a variety of complex literacy skills."

In this bonus episode, I talk with Emma Kostopolus about how she chooses to use and approach gaming in the writing classroom. She describes how valuable gaming is to student learning and collaboration and she offers a gaming assignment for teachers to consider using in their own writing classroom.

Emma Kostopolus is a PhD student at the University of Kansas. Her research interests include games and play in the classroom, multimodal composition pedagogy, and the rhetoric and language of video games.

Emma, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: I was hoping you could talk about how you incorporate games in the writing classroom and how teachers might consider using gaming as a means for developing and enriching skills like reading, writing, and critical thinking.

EK: Sure, okay. So there's a lot of preconceived notions about what people feel games in the classroom are because there's this kind of popular trend across a lot of different fields, right? Not only education but also marketing and business that's called "gamification," which is the adding of game-like elements to a thing that supposedly make it more engaging and fun. And gamification is really kind of something that I wanted to hit on because it works in ways that a lot of people find to be sort of antithetical to what we do in the writing classroom. And so they just sort of assume that gamification isn't what we want to do. So we just can't use games in the classroom. I just wanted to kind of open by saying that that isn't the be-all-end-all of what games in the writing classroom can be, right?

And so that is something that you do have to be careful of is you have to be very careful that you aren't just tacking a leaderboard or attaching something into your classroom and say, "Okay, well now I've gamified it so students are naturally going to be more engaged and have more fun, right?" Because that's not necessarily how it works. But there are two routes to using games in the classroom. I mean obviously it's their very large multivariate branches, but it is sort of whether you want to use digital games. So whether you want to be playing video games,

computer games or something in the classroom or whether you want to go a more traditional analog route and be doing things like tabletop games, role playing games or alternate reality games. And obviously there are benefits and drawbacks to both.

But what a lot of people have done is, I've seen a lot of people have their students play video games in the classroom as part of their, as kind of a collaborative assignment, right? Where you have this multiplayer game and the students have to complete tasks and they have to work collaboratively and they have to communicate. And then from this, from this experience of having these students who sort of engage in group work and do these things collaboratively and learn the literacy of the game, right? Because that's kind of what you're doing. Anytime you encounter new technology you are engaging in learning the literacy of what's going on. And then from there they move from simply playing the game to creating texts within and around the game. And these are called "paratexts" and so, and they're things, they can be things like game guides or they can be helpful tips for other players or they can be things like reviews of the game.

So sort of a lot of using video games in the classroom almost looks as though you're, you can treat the game kind of as a text on some level. It's almost like an essay that you read...it's content that you use to build off of. What I have actually done in the classroom and what I have found to be really, really productive and useful, because I didn't want to mess with the obvious technological limitations of video games where like maybe not everyone has access to a computer or maybe their computers can't run this particular video game is, I have found a lot of benefit in sort of taking it old school, right? Going kind of Dungeons and Dragons on it and creating narrative-based role play experiences for the students where I sort of have the students inhabit a role – and the role-playing scenario kind of functions as the rhetorical situation, right? Where I as kind of the game master provide the exigence and they know that they have this fictional audience that they're working with. And so then they kind of have to produce texts and work together to resolve problems. There's a whole lot of learning how to draft and formulate an argument and learning how to obviously collaborate, right, with this entire classroom of people to sort of solve this problem.

In my classroom specifically, what I have done is I have created a unit long, so about four or five weeks, of a zombie apocalypse simulator. And in this simulator students are placed in the role of a FEMA-esk aid organization and they are tasked with responding every day in different ways to the ever-escalating zombie crisis, right? It starts out, kind of very simply where I have them all in groups in their little kind of task forces.

So about four students I've found to be really productive. And they have just received word, right, that there has been an outbreak of this new virus that is doing all of these terrible, horrible things and zombies exist now. Their very first task is they have to draft basically an open letter to the public. They have to draft a statement that says, "We have received notice that these things are happening but remain calm and here is what you should do." So they have to kind of work in this very specific, and of course we do things, like show them samples and talk about how they must position themselves in terms of their ethos and that sort of thing. And it's kind of their first task. And then what I really like about the unit is that every day I present them with a scenario and I call them "the daily encounters." And in these daily encounters it was just like, okay, so as

this zombie crisis is worsening and now there are all of these people who need your help and you have to kind of respond to the situation. How are you going to respond? And I would just kind of continually throw monkey wrenches into their planning. And what I would have them do to respond to this is I would have them take some time and I would have them, do a little free write where they kind of like drafted their own ideas about the situation, what they would do if they were placed in this position. And then I would have them get into groups and they would discuss, in their groups, and come to a kind of consensus about, okay, our group wants to take this plan of action. And then we would all come together as a class and they would have to present their kind of written document of here's what we would do and why.

So over time they got really, really, really good at sort of developing these logic-based arguments in terms of well if we do this, these will be the consequences, right? But if we do this, then this will be the follow-up, but we have to do this. And then I actually built this little meter, right? On one end of the meter was total societal collapse, right? Like the zombies win. And then on the other end of the meter was life has returned to normal, you have solved the issue. And the class starts out in dead center of the meter. And based upon their decisions every day and their rationale for their decisions, like how well they could justify and argue to me that their decisions were the sound and correct decisions for the good of society, they would move sort of one way along the meter or the other.