

CHALK TALK: The Games They Make

By KEVIN HODGSON

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Our assistant principal wanders in on a two-hour delay day, to find my sixth-graders on the laptops in my writing classroom.

This is not all that unusual, but I find myself reflexively going into defense mode because I see through his eyes what he sees — my students playing video games in school.

“It’s not that they are just playing games,” I say, and then quickly explain how we are nearing the end of a unit on narrative writing and video game design, in which students designed and published video games with a Hero’s Journey story arc, and how the students he sees are in the act of peer reviewing and offering feedback to classmates’ games.

I add that the online platform we use, Gamestar Mechanic, has thousands of students around the world, playing each other’s games in as authentic a publishing space as one could imagine.

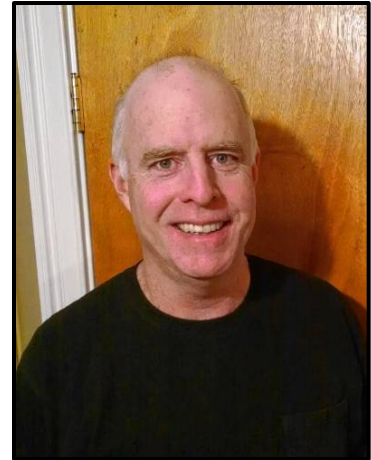
He shakes his head, not in judgement of my teaching but in amazement of the potential of technology to engage learners in new ways.

Later, the assistant principal leaves me a kind note, offering kudos for the innovative ways that we are using technology, video game design and writing in our sixth grade classroom. If I had more time, I would have also explained to him how the video game design element is merely one of the hooks for my students, and then listed out the many ways we use writing in our game design unit.

In fact, the game design is just one element of a much larger learning unit of instruction where writing and composition are at the heart of it all. If I were just letting my students play and make games, I would not be doing my job as an educator. All that we do with technology has a reason, and for the most part, that digital work has its roots in literacy moments.

Take some of the writing lessons we do during our game design unit.

We begin with storyboarding of the narrative frame of the game. In this case, the stories that will become video games are constructed along the frame of The Hero’s Journey, a frame that centers strongly in many



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books and movies. The storyboarding requires students to illustrate the various levels of their game project, and use writing to describe what will be happening in the game and with the story.

At certain junctures of the project, students write reflectively on their experiences as video game designers. They point to success and difficulty, and refinements in the narrative story frames of their games. This writing not only gives them a chance to think in writing, but also provides me with some insights for mini-lessons and conferencing.

Students are required to write a persuasive review of a video game or app that they play or have played. They do this work through a design lens — graphics, music, game-play, story — in a way that allows them to be critical of the media they play.

A letter writing campaign to Gamestar Mechanic gives students a platform to write about what they like about Gamestar, and what they wish would be made available. They use the letter format to establish a strong writer's voice and thinking, connecting with the real audience of designers of a game platform.

These young game designers must also create an advertising campaign for their video game projects. I turn to one of our sixth grade paraprofessionals, Sandy Klich, for her expertise as an artist and graphic designer. Our students deconstruct advertising elements, and then create their own advertisements for their games. These posters are then displayed around the sixth grade wing of our school.

Other writing assignments that I sometimes incorporate into the unit include argument writing around the use of Cheat Codes in video games, hacking the rules of card games like Uno to create a new twist to established games, designing a board game based on a reading book, and more. In fact, video game design opens up all sorts of avenues for writing, all connected to technology that many are already deeply immersed in outside of school.

Some years, our video game project has been science-based, and themes in the past have included layers of the earth, tectonic plates, and even buoyancy. We've done math game challenges around the PEMDAS acronym (parenthesis, exponents, multiplication, division, addition, subtraction) for solving problems.

Each year, some of my students also take part in the National STEM Video Game Challenge, using the skills they have developed as writers of stories and designers of games to enter into a national competition that takes place each spring and summer. Already, some of my sixth grade students have expressed interest, and who knows?

Maybe some future app or game you play on your phone will be created from the fertile minds of a young digital writer from Southampton.

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