Meaningful Play – Making Professional Development Fun

* * * On the Internet * * *

February 2015 — Volume 18, Number 4

Jeff Kuhn
Ohio University, Athens, Ohio
<kuhnj1@ohio.edu>

Young people like to play video games. These days it seems they play more video games than ever and the statistics bear this out. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2008) reports that 97% of teens ages 12-17 engage with some form of digital game on a daily basis. Game sales reflect this trend. In the early 2000s, the digital games market was growing but still lagged behind the more established markets of movies and music. However from 2002 to 2013 the digital games market tripled from $6.9 billion (IDSA, 2003) to $21.5 billion in 2013 (ESA, 2014, p. 3). Yet of all the stats and market data on digital games, one in particular stands out: 59% of Americans play video games and "women age 18 or older represent a significantly greater portion of the game-playing population (36%) than boys age 18 or younger (17%)" (ESA, 2014, p. 3). It is not just that kids play games. The figures suggest that almost everyone in possession of a digital device uses it at some point to play games.

Video games have become a staple of popular culture for a large segment of the population but for kids in particular they are becoming the preferred source of entertainment. With this new entertainment comes new literacy skills as well. Kids will assume those around them have a knowledge about games and how they function in the same way older generations assume a literacy regarding books, movies and music. In the near future claiming you do not understand games will evoke a response similar to claiming you 'don't get music'.

This claim may seem like a warning call about 'kids these days', however it is not an omen but an offer. The landscape of digital games and the wealth of cooperation and collaboration around them are perhaps the most dynamic learning spaces the world currently has to offer. To have the most holistic assessment of our students' abilities, we need to be aware of these spaces to better understand how our students are learning outside of the classroom. Also, as teachers, we should be aware of these spaces as they offer a powerful new opportunity for us to engage in new approaches to professional development.

Dikkers (2012) investigated award winning teachers to discover the secret of their success. Of the thirty-two teachers interviewed, Dikkers found that professional

development played only a small role in their award winning teaching. What did influence their professional development was interacting with other teachers, getting tuned into a new idea, exploring the idea, and playing with it before bringing it into the classroom.

This approach to teachers' professional development reflects the findings on how youth interact with digital spaces. When young people enter these spaces some "will only dabble, some will dig deeper, and still others will master the skills that are most valued within the community. The community itself, however, provides strong incentives for creative expression and active participation" (Jenkins, Purushotma, Weigel, Clinton & Robinson, 2009, p. 6). Parallel research by Ito et al. (2008; 2010) found similar results and labeled these phases as *hanging out*, *messing around* and *geeking out*.

In hanging out participants tend to observe or lurk with low levels of participation and will dabble in a wide assortment of media before beginning to mess around. During the messing around phase participants will begin to engage with a digital community but do so with a high tolerance for failure. By setting a high threshold for failure they allow themselves opportunities for risk taking and skill development. After a period of hanging out and messing around participants in these digital spaces will begin to geek out with a digital tool, software, or community that clicks with them. In this stage they will develop tremendous skills and devote considerable time to become adept at what engages them.

The power of these digital spaces is in the ability of participants to practice in context. It seems that learners can use the Internet to engage in *cognitive apprenticeship*, where "conceptual and factual knowledge is exemplified and situated in the contexts of its use" (Collins, Brown, & Newman, 1989, p. 3). In these spaces learning is connected tightly with doing, and doing so within a context. According to Kolb (1984), the most powerful learning comes from direct experience through action-taking and seeing the consequences of that action. Kolb's (1984) description of experiential learning mirrors the design goals of games which "offer designed experiences, in which participants learn through a grammar of doing and being" (Squire, 2006, p. 19).

Language instructors have long leveraged the interaction inherent in games to provide students classroom opportunities for spontaneous language practice. Dobson (1972) outlined the characteristics of good games for the language classroom as needing little to no preparation, having a low learning curve while challenging the students' thinking, and entertaining but staying within the bounds of classroom behavior. Savignon (1975) built upon this by adding that classroom games must require some level of emotional investment in the students while being flexible enough for variation depending on the classroom context. Most critically, Savignon requires that success in good classroom games hinges on the learners ability to freely use the target language and that the game refrains from controlling learner output.

The characteristics Dobson (1972) and Savignon (1975) outline would strike most instructors as the those of an effective language classroom. Forty years later and Reinders (2012) argues much the same stating that games are identical to effective classroom practice with an emphasis on learner control in an environment that

encourages exploration while providing feedback in the attempt to achieve a clear goal. Good games and good learning are hard to tell apart.

From games to Games

With the rise of the Internet age the social component of games has taken on a new scale. No longer bound by place, gamers can engage with a community of players across the world. These communities represent new participatory cultures that foster and encourage informal learning. Jenkins et al. (2009) describe these participatory cultures as having the following characteristics:

1.   Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement

2.   Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others

3.   Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices

4.   Members who believe that their contributions matter

5.   Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created) (pp. 5-6)

Games researcher James Paul Gee refers to the participatory communities around games as 'big-g' Games (Gee, 2008) in contrast to the 'small-g' games around which they are built. These Games are the communities that develop around games to share information, trade strategy, or engage others of similar interests. These interactions can take the form of websites, Youtube videos, or posts through social media. Games are the discourse that develops around particular games.

In this year's annual EVO sessions (Electronic Village Online, http://evosessions.pbworks.com) I helped co-moderate the EVO Minecraft MOOC session. In this session, participants learned how to play and use Minecraft as a teaching tool not only through the game of Minecraft but also through the Game of the Minecraft EVO.

EVO Minecraft 2015

In this year's EVO Minecraft MOOC session we used the concept of Games to create a community of practice for language teachers to learn and explore in the game Minecraft. In so doing we tried to establish a community built upon the five principles of Jenkins et al., (2009) and allow teachers to learn through a process of hanging out, messing around, and geeking out.

Vance Stevens instigated the idea of the Minecraft EVO as what he calls a *flipped syllabus* concept. Vance had long been aware of Minecraft and its potential but was unsure where to begin in unpacking the game. By offering an EVO course where participants would equally share knowledge, Vance thought he might learn from those with more knowledge and contribute his knowledge of the game to those newer to the game.

As Vance puts it:

> *I want to use games in my classroom. There's this neat game Minecraft that I've been learning a lot about – for the past several years actually — but don't know how to crack it. (Stevens, 2015)*

This quote suggests Vance was already in the hanging out stage of learning about Minecraft but was looking for a way to engage with the larger community and begin messing around with the game. According to him, this community would bolster his engagement with the game:

> *My problem was no access to a server and community. I think I was having trouble 'getting' it when I was playing alone – the nature of the game changed for me once we got a community into the mix. (Stevens, 2015)*

Vance took an unusual and innovative step in creating a community with which to engage. By creating a community around a flipped syllabus concept Vance could interact with a community of peers in which he could learn about Minecraft. In Vance's words:

> *If you expect students to get into your crazy ideas and trust you and those ideas to help facilitate their learning, why not do the same with an EVO session? Take teachers whom you expect are going to stand up in front of a class and introduce a game they know less about than the students, show them what it feels like — no, let them experience what it feels like to be in this learning situation — and then (as with crisis management and zombies) RESOLVE it, feel it getting better, feel their expertise grow; as Ito says, go from messing around, like I was doing for too long with MC, to hanging out with a bunch of people there, and see what it's like to get geeky, and what happens after that. (Stevens, 2015)*

From this standpoint Vance began to construct the Minecraft EVO MOOC and intentionally or not built it around the concepts outlined by Jenkins et al. (2009).

Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement

As with all EVO sessions the Minecraft EVO was free to join and was developed using a Google Plus community as a central repository for sharing and communication outside of Minecraft (http://tinyurl.com/evomc15). Minecraft was the 'game' and the Google Plus page became our 'Game' where we could gather, share, and collaborate in our exploration of the game.

Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others

The EVO session centered around a shared Minecraft server set up by the author. Participants were encouraged to join our weekly Friday server parties. In these sessions participants would populate the Minecraft server and join a group Skype call. Our Minecraft server was initially set to creative mode. In this mode all the building blocks are infinitely available. Participants were encouraged to build anything they wanted. All the creations were preserved and many screenshots were posted to the Google Plus page.

Figure 1. On our creative server players engaged in building whatever they wanted.

Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices

As Vance assembled his EVO team he enlisted the help of Marijana Smolčec, her son Filip, David Dodgson, and myself (see Smolčec, Smolčec, and Stevens, 2014). Each of us was able to bring skills and experience to the Minecraft MOOC that could be shared with other members. During our server parties, participants could freely ask questions to the experts. Our experts, most notably Filip, taught newer players how to use the basic controls of the game, ride horses, deal with plagues of rabbits, and even make changes to the server. All of the learning was impromptu, contextualized, and occurred while participants messed around in-game.

Members who believe that their contributions matter

The Minecraft EVO MOOC was always open and available. Participants were encouraged to engage both on the Google Plus page as well as in-game, as the server ran twenty-four hours a day. The moderators of the MOOC tried their best to stay engaged with everyone, which was assisted by having all the moderators in a variety of time zones. In-game, the contributions of all the players were represented by a continually growing world. Each block placed, or even destroyed, was preserved as a legacy of our interaction on our server, and became part of a in-game history that reflected the actions of every player.

Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another

In true hanging out, messing around, and geeking out fashion the Minecraft EVO session had sixty-seven participants who hung out. Of these about a third moved on to messing around and posted on the Google Plus page. From this smaller group that messed

around, the majority geeked out on the game and became active participants on the Minecraft server and Google Plus page. Near the beginning of the MOOC participants posted on academic matters but over the five weeks the community began to take on a different character and more posts began to reflect our shared in-game adventure.
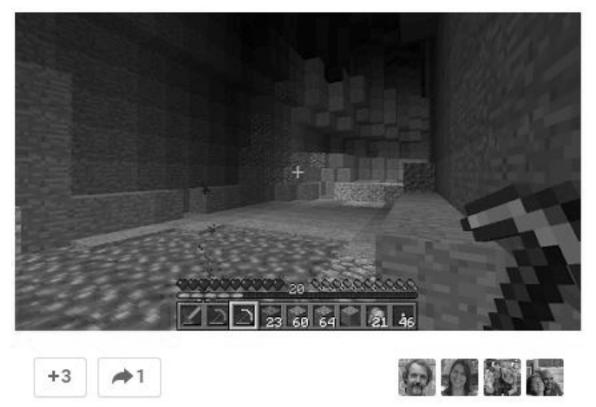

Figure 2. After Jeff became lost in game, the community rallied in support.

The Community as the Curriculum

These characteristics were a natural progression from Vance's original idea of a flipped syllabus as participants co-constructed the learning agenda of the EVO. It seems that not only learners, but teachers as well, can use the Internet to engage in cognitive apprenticeship. This apprenticeship approach allows participants to generate a deeper understanding of concepts and create a matrix of associations between concepts and contexts. Via the Internet and its digital communities, we can engage in digital cognitive apprenticeship and learn from a community. The Minecraft EVO embraced this concept and fostered a participatory culture where learning was not so much an outcome but a process. As Vance wrote:

> *My take on Webheads and most other things I tackle is "let's get it going!" like throwing a party, and invite as many people as you can, and if it's a good concept and there are enough people, it'll be a great party :-) It's a little off the wall, but if you're going to use games in class, this is what you want to do. (Stevens, 2015)*

As teachers this may be just what we want to do, not just for our students, but for ourselves, in our professional development.

Conclusion

For next year's EVO session it might be of both practical and academic benefit to investigate the patterns of hanging out, messing around, and geeking out that occur across all sessions. This research could analyze how many EVO sessions on average each participant joined as well as track their participation in each EVO. It would be interesting to see, on a whole, where TESOL members choose to geek out.

The EVO in its approach to professional development reflects the emerging goals of TESOL itself as stated in the recent TESOL Governance Review Task Force Report (2014):

> *To ensure that TESOL International Association has a governance system that efficiently and effectively responds to the evolving needs of TESOL members and the profession;* **supports communities of practice; facilitates collaboration in a professional learning community** *[emphasis added]; and is built on a culture of knowledge, trust, nimbleness, and transparency (p. 10).*

The model and structure of the EVO sessions supports these communities of practice and facilitates collaboration. This year's EVO hosted thirteen sessions ranging from teaching pronunciation, to young learners, to machinima, to Minecraft. Having a diversity of content and encouraging teachers to sample a variety of these sessions allows them to approach professional development via hanging out, messing around, and geeking out. As Dikkers (2012) asserts, professional development need not be a top-down structured program. Teacher PD thrives in an environment where teachers can interact, discover new ideas, and have space to play. This is what the EVO does, and perhaps next year's motto should be 'Let's Play'.

References

Collins, A., Brown, J. S., & Newman, S. E. (1989). Cognitive apprenticeship: Teaching the crafts of reading, writing, and mathematics.*Knowing, learning, and instruction: Essays in honor of Robert Glaser, 18*, 32-42.

Dikkers, S. M. (2012). The Professional development trajectories of teachers successfully integrating and practicing with new information and communication technologies.

Dobson, J. (1972). Try one of my games. In K. Croft (Ed.), *Readings on English as a second language for teachers and teacher-trainees* (pp. 361-377). Cambridge, MA: Winthrop Publishers, Inc.

Entertainment Software Association. (2014).*2013 Annual report*. Washington, DC: Author.

Gee, J.P. (2008) "Learning and games." *The ecology of games: Connecting youth, games, and learning*. Edited by Katie Salen. The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation

Series on Digital Media and Learning. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. doi: 10.1162/dmal.9780262693646.021 (pp. 21-40).

Interactive Digital Software Association, (2003). *Essential facts about the computer and video game industry: 2003 sales, demographics, and usage data*. Washington, DC: Author.

Ito, M., Horst, H., Bittanti, M., Boyd, D., Herr-Stephenson, B., Lange, P. G., ... & Robinson, L. (2008). *Living and learning with new media: Summary of findings from the Digital Youth Project*. John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Ito, M., Baumer, S., Bittanti, M., Cody, R., Herr-Stephenson, B., Horst, H. A., ... & Tripp, L. (2010). *Hanging out, messing around, and geeking out*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. Available:https://mitpress.mit.edu/sites/default/files/titles/free_download/97802620 13369_Hanging_Out.pdf.

Jenkins, H., Purushotma, R., Weigel, M., Clinton, K., & Robinson, A. J. (2009). Confronting the challenges of participatory culture: Media Education for the 21st Century *The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning*. Cambridge, MA.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Kuhn, J. (2014). The world is not enough: The need for game design. *IATEFL LT SIG & TESOL CALL-IS Web Conference on Gaming and Gamification – a Win-Win for Language Learning*. Recordinghttp://iatefl.adobeconnect.com/p4zf1evoz43/.

Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2008). *Teens, video games, and civics*. Washington, DC: Author.

Reinders, H. (Ed.). (2012). *Digital games in language learning and teaching*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Savignon, S. J. (1975). Lecture on communicative competence. *Lektos: Interdisciplinary Working Papers in Language Sciences, 1*(1).

Squire, K. (2006). From content to context: Videogames as designed experience. *Educational researcher, 35*(8), 19-29.

Smolčec, M., Smolčec, F, & Stevens, V. (2014). *Using Minecraft for learning English. TESL-EJ 18*(2), 1-15. Available: http://tesl-ej.org/pdf/ej70/int.pdf.

Stevens, V. (2015). EVO Minecraft mOOC: How it came about. *AdVanceEducation*. Available:http://advanceducation.blogspot.ae/2015/02/evo-minecraft-mooc-how-it-came-about.html.

TESOL. (2014). *Governance review task force public report*. Alexandria, VA: Author.