VIDEO GAMES:
THE NEW MEDIA LITERACY

As little as ten years ago, videogames were considered a risky addition to the classroom. However, over the last decade games have seen tremendous growth as out-of-class entertainment and in-classroom learning tools. For many students, games are their primary form of entertainment, and teachers have begun to see the potential for games as avenues for problem-solving and experience-based learning.

The power of videogames, and the reason for their exceptional growth, comes from videogames being the first form of media that is dynamic. Traditional forms of media, such as books, movies, and music are defined as being *consumptive*. These forms of media are unchanged by their consumers; everyone who reads a book reads the same story and gets the same ending. What videogames do differently is react to the user; as individuals play a game, the game changes. This results in *emergence*, where the story unfolds as a result of player choices. Players playing the same game get different stories and get different endings. In short, games provide experience.

This experience can be leveraged to great effect in the classroom. Experience drives communication and through games students can engage in experiences that can then be communicated through speaking and writing activities.

In this week's Teacher's Corner, we look at several videogames that can be used for classroom purposes. Each of these games can be played individually by students in a fully equipped classroom or can be played together in a more traditional classroom setting. In fact, even in a computer lab, the preferred method of playing all these games is as a class or in small groups. This allows for the decision making inherent in games to become a communication activity as well. The activities listed below are only a few ideas that can be used with each of these games. These games are all freely available, though two are only available online so an Internet connection will be required.

TRACE EFFECTS

Trace Effects is a videogame specifically designed for language learners. The game chronicles the story of Trace, an accidental time traveler, who must find and assist a variety of individuals to complete the time machine's mission. Over the course of seven chapters, players explore America and interact with characters to help Trace return home to the future.

Trace Effects is available online, or a DVD-based version can be acquired via the local U.S. Embassy's Regional English Language Office.

Trace Effects comes with an extensive Teacher's Manual. Before using the game in class it is recommended to review the manual which contains a substantial number of classroom activities that can be used with the game.

In the game *Trace Effects,* players must interact with other characters through dialogue choices. The characters in videogames not controlled by the player are referred to as Non-Playable Characters (NPCs). Players interact with the NPCs through dialogue choices ranging from polite interactions to more direct

or less formal speaking. Players are challenged to use the most contextually proper response to earn the most points. These dialogue choices are selected from a menu and then spoken by the character of Trace. Characters respond to Trace via audio only.

This use of audio-only responses provides an opportunity to work together in small groups and play a digital version of the classic classroom game of telephone.

TRACE EFFECTS ACTIVITIES

Trace Telephone
1. If playing in a computer lab, ensure that each computer has a set of headphones. If playing as a class, have one set of headphones connected to the computer.
2. Have the students form pairs or small groups. Divide the responsibilities of the pairs/small groups. One player should be in charge of the controls, while the other player wears the headphones.
3. Let the groups begin a game of *Trace Effects*. The player with the headphones must communicate the responses of the other characters to their partner or group.
   a. If playing as a whole class, have one student come to the front of the class to be the reporter. Then the remainder of the class can shout out/vote for what should be selected next in the dialogue chain.

Optional Expansion
For more advanced classes, the challenge of using reported speech can be added to the activity. If playing as a whole class, have one student come to the front of the class to act as the reporter. This student must successfully change the dialogue of the NPC (Non-Playable Character) to reported speech. If successful, the same student continues to be the class reporter. If the student does not use the correct reported speech, the reporter must sit down and a new student comes to the front of the class to assume the role. The student who correctly reports the longest series of dialogue responses wins!

What happens next?
This simple activity takes advantage of the *Trace Effects* Intro and Outro videos. For this activity, students will need a sheet of paper and a pencil.
1. Begin by having the students start a game of *Trace Effects*, or start a new chapter of the game.
   a. In the online version of *Trace Effects*, players continue from their last completed chapter. In the DVD version of the game, players can select any chapter to play.
2. Have the students watch the intro video. Once the video is over, have them write down their predictions for the chapter. For more advanced classes, have the students turn their predictions into paragraph form and write a short story.
3. The ending of *Trace Effects* is somewhat vague. After students have completed the game, have them make one final set of predictions where they write a more elaborate ending for the game.
   a. Writing a new ending can be built into a competition. Students, alone or in pairs, write an ending to the game and submit them. Names can then be removed from the stories and returned to the class. The class then reads the stories and decides which story is the best ending.
      i. Alternately, students can write endings for each of the characters in the game. In the future, what happens to Trace, Eddie, Kit, Andre, and others? This can

provide the students the opportunity to write more specific endings or practice a particular grammar point such as the future progressive.

SPENT

While *Trace Effects* represents a more traditional educational videogame, *Spent* is an example of 'serious games'. These games are designed to help players experience and understand a situation that is unfamiliar to them. Often this type of game places the player in 'another person's shoes'.

Spent is a serious game that highlights the challenges facing the working poor in the U.S. The goal of the game is to live for thirty days on a very limited income. During the month, players are faced with challenges on how to spend their limited finances.

Through these choices, students have the opportunity to engage in class discussions that may otherwise be too abstract to have. Should they take their children out for a day of fun for $45 or use this money to pay an outstanding bill? This is just one of the many choices that players need to make in *Spent*.

When using a game such as *Spent* in class, two types of player behavior tends to emerge. Some students will play the game to simply win and will make all the choices needed to do so no matter how extreme. Other players engage in a more empathetic play style and assume the roles of the characters in the game. This tension between the two play styles can provide a rich groundwork on which to build class discussions as the class negotiates for and then votes on choices to make in the game. Therefore, it is recommended to play *Spent* as a class.

SPENT ACTIVITIES

Spent can be used as a story writing platform. The following are two examples of using *Spent* as a platform for writing.
Dear Diary – Today I Lost My Job
1. Have the students, alone or in groups, play *Spent*.
2. As the students play, have them record all the choices they make in a notebook. Encourage them to note the day, the choices they had, and the choices ultimately made.
3. Once students have completed the game (successfully or unsuccessfully) have them write the story of their experience. Encourage them to create names and personalities for the character with background, current circumstances, and thoughts/feelings.
   a. While the game begins with the player having lost a job, specifics are not given. Have the students elaborate on this idea – how did they lose their job?
4. Students can also keep a live journal of the game and create diary writing assignments. The game does not run on a time limit, so students can pause before or after choices and write a diary entry to elaborate on the feelings and experiences encountered in the game.
5. After the game ends, have students finish the story: What happens next? Does the fortune of their character make a turnaround or do they continue to see misfortune?

If I Had …

1. After students have played *Spent*, have them discuss their experiences with a classmate and analyze the choices they made.
   a. This can also be completed as a class exercise and the class can review the choices made by the group.
2. As students discuss their choices, encourage them to use the Third Conditional - (if + past perfect, ... would + have + past participle) *If I had not lived so far from work, I would have saved money*. Have them share their experiences.
   a. As an optional expansion, after students have shared their story with a partner, have them report their partner's experience to the class.

Serious games such as *Spent* may seem too morose for the classroom. Keep in mind, however, that with teenage students it can be challenging to discuss these topics. Games are able to provide a focal point to more serious topics, such as poverty, that can make it easier for discussion to occur than if the students were asked to talk about themselves or their own contexts.

QUANDRY

Quandry is a web-based game that allows players to intervene in conflicts in a fictional colony of human settlers on another planet. The game requires the player to hear both sides of a disagreement, separate between facts, solutions, and opinions, as well as use facts to convince supporters of opposing viewpoints. Each episode of the game contains a series of comic book-like panels which narrate the story. All of the text in these panels can also be played as audio, giving English language learners exposure to listening as well as reading.

During the course of an episode the player, acting as captain of the colony, hears both sides of an argument. With both sides of the argument represented, the captain takes the argument to the Colonial Council. This council then decides on the best course of action.

QUANDRY ACTIVITIES

The Council Decides
1. *Quandry* can be played as an entire class activity. During playtime, students can sort through the facts, solutions, and opinions of the colonists.
2. Once two possible solutions have been found, stop gameplay and have the students form pairs or small groups. The students can then discuss the pros and cons of each solution and decide the best course of action.
3. After each pair/small group has come to a decision on the correct course of action, tally up support for each of the solutions. The solution with the most support wins.

Space Debate
While the context of *Quandry* is a futuristic, science fiction story, the conflicts presented in the game are relatable to students' daily lives. For example, Episode 3 "Fashion Faction" deals with the modification of uniforms and whether individuals should be allowed to dress as they like. This can be a platform for student debates about school uniforms
1. Have the students play through Episode 3 of *Quandry*. In this episode, the colony argues the wearing of modified uniforms at colony meetings as the colony rules state only official uniforms may be worn.

2. Continue until the "Investigate Viewpoints" section of the episode. Instead of relying on the character response, have students offer their own responses. Write these responses on the board. As students begin to give opinions on the issue, ask the class if this issue is similar to the rule of wearing school uniforms. Ask them which of the responses written on the board can be applied to the argument of school uniforms.
3. At this time, break the students into two groups and inform them they will debate the requirement for school uniforms.
4. On the board write 'School uniforms are necessary for equality and order in the classroom.' Tell students this is the subject of the debate. Explain that like the colonists in episode 3, some people feel uniforms provide order and keep the focus of the classroom on education, not fashion, wealth, etc. Others argue that students should be free to express their identity, interests, and fashion through clothes.
5. Assign the two groups a position for the debate. In traditional debate format, a statement is presented and one side argues for the positon and the other argues against the position.
   a. For this exercise the statement is 'School uniforms are necessary for equality and order in the classroom.' Assign one group to be the supporters of this position and one group to be the opposition to this position.
6. Give the groups time to organize their ideas and generate supporting arguments. Students can return to episode 3 of *Quandry* to the sections "Arguments For" and "Arguments Against." These sections of the episode can help them generate ideas.
   a. After students have had 5-10 minutes to organize their ideas, bring the class back together to provide the structure of the debate.
7. Tell the groups the debate format is as follows:
   a. The supporters of the statement will be given two minutes to overview their ideas.
   b. Next, the opposition will be given two minutes to overview their ideas.
      i. Remind the students that as their opponents speak, they should take notes on the ideas so they can offer a rebuttal later.
8. Once the opening statements from each group have finished, have the groups review the notes of their opponents' ideas. From these notes the group should develop a rebuttal argument.
   a. Give the students 5-10 minutes to create a rebuttal. Once both groups are ready, begin the rebuttal phase of the debate. This time, the opposition speaks first.
9. After the rebuttals are complete, have the speakers return to their groups. Give the groups 5-10 minutes to prepare for the question phase of the debate.
   a. In this phase, the groups have the opportunity to question the arguments and rebuttals offered by their opponents. The supporters of the position are the first to ask a question. Have the groups alternate in asking questions.
10. Once the question phase is complete decide which group had the most effective argument. Perhaps the group with the best argument and logic gets excused from homework for one night!

Options
If the class is too large to support this format of debate, have the class spit into small groups and conduct the debate similar to a small group discussion.

The other episodes of *Quandry* offer other ethical issues, such as sharing resources versus private ownership, which can also be used as the basis for a class debate.