

KOUT, YACINE, Ph.D. Breaking Down the Enchantment: A Critical Autoethnography of Video Gaming (2019)

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Video games are flooding our everyday lives from our phones to our schools. Our understanding of this medium is still developing as it shapes players' sense of self and their view of the world. This study contributes to bridging that gap by questioning the educative power of video games and their impact on our society through an autoethnographic lens. I analyze my video gaming experiences by journaling, field noting, and crafting epiphanies that represent my history with this medium. I use critical pedagogy as a theoretical framework to unpack and dismantle my experiences as a long standing member of the video gaming community. I use critical themes such as identity building, meaning making, and oppression to make sense of my data. Through these themes, I answer my two central research questions: How did I navigate the video gaming culture as a student of critical pedagogy and in what ways do video games lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy.

Using a critical lens allows this study to deconstruct unexamined experiences that shape player identities. To answer my research questions, I use the concept of enchantment to capture the complexity of the stories I have grown up with, both the power I have drawn from them to build a sense of identity and my naïveté in overlooking, minimizing, or ignoring problematic and oppressive behaviors tied to these stories. I share how the wording of my experiences pushed me into adopting a new identity that reconciled my history as a video game player and my identity as a student of critical pedagogy. Through the deconstruction of my experiences, I also identified video gaming

tools that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. I share how these tools can be used in the classroom to help players/students question their own thinking, name their prejudice, and identify oppressive social systems. My study echoes Bochner's concept of a story of "two selves," a space that allowed me to better understand the culture I am part of and my role in it. My moving from an enchanted understanding to a continuous questioning of my engagement with a medium that holds a central place in my life constitutes an invitation to examine the stories we have all grown up with. In identifying both the power they have given us and the power they have over us, we can assess their impact and meaning, and therefore better understand ourselves.

BREAKING DOWN THE ENCHANTMENT:  
A CRITICAL AUTOETHNOGRAPHY  
OF VIDEO GAMING

by

Yacine Kout

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

My project is a critical autoethnographic study on the meaning of video gaming in my life. This project examines over thirty years of video gaming experiences through the power of stories. My goal is to gain a better understanding of video gaming by examining my lived experiences as a student of critical pedagogy. This project was born out of a rift between the research on video gaming and my experiences as someone who grew up with video games and sees in them the possibility to address injustice in our world.

#### **A Thirty-Year-Old Relationship**

Video games have been a part of my life since I was a boy. Some of my earliest memories take me back to my vacation in my uncle's house in Algeria. There, I would skip trips to the beaches of Algiers to play dinosauric games with rectangles and squares for graphics. In my middle school years in my native France, I remember staring at the clock eager to rush to my local arcade. Sometimes I would bring a bag of *chips bolognaises* to munch on in between 'game overs.' There, my friends and I would team up in *Double Dragon* (Technos Japan, 1987) to karate kick and baseball bat our way through waves of 'bad guys.' When I did not have money to play, I would head there anyway and watch strangers play to learn from them or offer them all the wisdom an 11-year-old player could muster. In that circle, some of my friends started calling me YAC

as there were only three spaces available on the high scores list. Video gaming became an identity.

In the mid 1980's, my parents surprised me with a gift that to this day I consider the best present I ever received: an Amstrad CPC464. This European machine played games by loading cassettes, a process that lasted several minutes and produced a horrible screeching sound. It took years of saving for my parents to afford that computer. Even though I received this cassette computer when 3½ floppy disks machines were out and cassettes were becoming a technology of the past, this computer is one the fondest and most significant memories of my childhood. I knew this was a financial sacrifice for them then. This gesture is all the more meaningful now, that I too am a parent.

In my high school years, my younger brother Farouk and I created our own competition format in *Street Fighter 2* (Capcom, 1994). I had to pick every single character available once, whereas he was free to pick whoever he wanted however many times he wanted. That format created a handicap for me as my skill level was above his. These days are long gone. Today, he plays in national competitions and destroys me in every version of that game.

More than thirty years after I first slid a five *franc* coin into an arcade machine, I still play video games. For example, I am a member of a megaguild, a community that counts thousands of players who mainly play World of Warcraft (Activision Blizzard, 2004). I am also a gold ranked player in League of Legends (Riot Games, 2009) for the second season in a row. That rank places me in the 11.66% to 37.73% percentile of ranked accounts. I also own over 100 games in Steam (Valve Corporation, 2003), a

popular online “entertainment platform” where players buy games, form communities, and share creations such as player-created levels. Many of these games I binge bought during sales and have not had time to play. Today, some of my favorite games embed social commentary in their narrative or gameplay. In that category, the games that marked me include *Soldats Inconnus: Mémoires de la grande guerre* (Ubisoft, 2014) which critiques war by offering different perspectives on World War I, *Papo y yo* (Minority Media, 2013) which deals with child abuse, or *Tacoma* (Fulbright, 2017) which addresses labor issues among many others. Video games are a passion of mine. I play them. I make friends through them. Playing games is an important part of who I am.

### **A Cultural Phenomenon**

At the beginning of my video gaming life, video games used to be confined to specific spaces such as arcades, living rooms, or recess discussions. Over the last ten years or so, video games have sprung out of these spaces. They have merged into our everyday life. They have become a cultural phenomenon. People play on computers, cell phones, and through Facebook. Video games have also expanded to other media, markets, and cultural spheres. *Minecraft* (Mojang AB, 2011) has its own line of toys. The *Tomb Raider* series has a duo of high caliber Hollywood movies starring Angelina Jolie (Baird & West, 2001; Heath-Smith & de Bont, 2003) and another *Tomb Raider* movie released in 2018 (Crevello & Uthoag). The *Angry Birds* series has an animated feature movie (Hed, Maisel, Kaytis & Reilly, 2016) and a TV series focusing on *The Secret World Legends* is in development (Fahey, 2017). Players of every age wear clothing



emblazoned with video game characters or logos such as *Link* (Nintendo, 1987) or *Freddy Fazbear* (Cawthon, 2013).

In addition to the sprawl of video games into other media and markets, the video gaming culture has also provided a conduit for other enterprises to make money and increase their visibility. Toys like *Barbie* and comic book heroes such as *Spiderman* have their own video games or video game series. The military, both the US Army (United States Army, 2002) and the British army (Publicis, 2009), have developed video games for military recruitment. Corporations have introduced advertisements within games, such as Chevrolet ads on the sidelines of the *FIFA 17* soccer game (EA Vancouver, 2017). Many industries and enterprises have taken advantage of the video game phenomenon and thus they have further contributed to its expansion and normalization.

The sphere of e-sports, video game competitions, is also on the rise. In 2014, more viewers watched the world finals of the *League of Legends* championship than the NBA finals (Dorsey, 2014). In Asia, e-sports have been popular for years. There, some players make a living out of winning. Faker, one of the most famous *League of Legends* competitor, has earned over \$1 million dollar in 4 years (Grubb, 2017). In the USA, e-sports is still catching up to this level of popularity, but collegiate e-sports is gaining steam. Several game companies have created collegiate championships. My very own school, UNCG, placed second nationally in the *World of Warcraft* Great Collegiate Dungeon Race (Blizzard Entertainment, 2017). Some schools, such as Robert Morris University, even offer scholarships to attract video game players (Touchberry, 2017).

Video games have become unavoidable. The video game culture has spread to many facets of our lives. It continues to sprawl. Video games are played by people of all ages, 27% of all players are over 50 years old, and the distribution by gender shows a quasi-even number of male and female players, 56% for the former and 44% for the latter (Entertainment Software Association, 2015). In a world where video games have had such a cultural impact, studying them and their impact is primordial. As someone who has grown up with this medium, I feel a responsibility to make a contribution in regard to the study and understanding of what Giroux (2013) calls the “screen culture” (p.179).

After a few years in my doctoral program, I dedicated myself to the study of video games through critical pedagogy. Apple, Au & Godin (2011) summarize the goals of critical pedagogy as broadly seeking “to expose how relations of power and inequality (social, cultural, economic) in their myriad forms of combinations, and complexities are manifest and are challenged in the formal and informal education of children and adults” (p.3). Critical pedagogy has provided me with a theory to make sense of my life, including video games, in a new and empowering way. It gave me a sense of agency and the desire to study a culture I am a member of. I saw in the questioning and analysis of my experiences the possibility to use video games to question power and make our world a better place. I now share a thirty-year-old story that embodies the power video games have had in my life and how I reinterpreted that story a couple of years ago through critical questioning.

## **My ActRaiser Story**

*We're in 1990 at my parents' house. I am in my room ready to roll. I put the cartridge in. The game loads quickly. Control pad in hand. I am set for a challenge.*

*"Ok, let's play this." I press start. "Alright, what's this one about?" I speed read through the scrolling introductory text eager to start hacking and slashing: This world is in disarray. Bla bla bla. Monsters and demons roam these lands. Bla bla bla. humans need a savior. They call upon 'you', a minor deity to rescue them.*

*"A minor deity? I guess that's all they could muster. Sure, I can do that." And so it started. Hours of fighting followed. As I took the minor deity through the levels, it grew in power. After the first city was founded, I was able to call upon magical fires, then came thunder bolts and fire breath. The stage was set. I needed more victories, more believers, and more power ups to defeat the Evil forces that plagued these lands. With each freed region, more humans believed. With each new temple, more worshippers sang the praises of their savior.*

ActRaiser (Quintet Co., Ltd, 1990) was a good game. It was entertaining without being a blockbuster. It offered a mix of genres. One level was about hacking and slashing, imagine Mario with a sword and spells. The next level was a city managing game, think about simcity, a simulation in which you can place buildings and create a town. Basically, I spent one level dispatching demons clearing a piece of land, and then the next level was about managing that land in order to grow a city and help humans settle.

*Towards the end of the game, my character had become a powerful deity. Many humans believed in it. All along they had erected statues in its image and built kingdoms in its name. After hours of play the time for the final fight had come. That boss, the scourge of humanity, did not leave a particular mark on me. Defeating it was no challenge. I had finally saved humans. Their world was free of all they feared. My character headed back to the capital, head high, chest out, ready for glory. I thought I had won.*

As in many games of the early 90's, the ending sequence offered a series of scrolling texts and short scenes during which I, the player, was limited to reading and watching the epilogue.

*My character triumphantly marched back to his city. I thought I knew what was coming. I imagined lines of radiant people dancing throughout the streets. Joyful kids on the shoulders of their celebrating parents. Colorful petals falling from the bluest sky. Well, the deity was not ready for what was coming and neither was I.*

*Deserted streets. No song. No praises. Not a soul. Nothing. The deity wandered through the streets. He entered the main temple where humans had placed a colossal statue in His name. That space was now empty. The statue was gone.*

*The narrator, who was wrapping up the story, explained that because their world was now empty of evil, humans no longer had a reason to worship. Therefore, my character who had become a powerful god found himself abandoned. Forgotten, he became dormant.*

Figure 1. A Screenshot of the Epilogue



*A screenshot of the epilogue. The space where worshippers had built a statue of my character is now empty. I interpreted it as a symbol of human's extinct faith.*

This epilogue shattered what I used to think of as "winning the game." While the concepts of gold and glory had never appealed to me, they constituted what I had learned to expect from completing video games. From Super Mario Bros. (Nintendo, 1985) to Sonic (Sega, 1991), the narrative was pretty much the same: triumph and prestige await the player at the end of the endeavor. ActRaiser's ending was not about that. ActRaiser's ending had a message about the meaning of faith and believing. That message shook me. It sent my head spinning. It made me question my understanding of religion, worship, believers, god, and gods. Questions swirled in my brain "do people only believe when they are scared of something? If they are not afraid, do they stop worshipping and believing? In what other ways have people used gods or religions for their own ends? Where do gods go when they are forgotten? Who holds power in religion?" Growing up Muslim in my native France in the 1990's, I had just a few people to ask these questions to, namely my parents. None of their answers satisfied my thirst.

I was only a teenager when I played this game but this moment has stayed with me. The game and the reflections it triggered have impacted the ways in which I think about religion. As a matter of fact, my playing the game, amongst many other factors and events, has played a role - even if minor - in my decision not to follow a religious path. ActRaiser played a role in forming my identity as a non-religious person. After that experience, I saw myself as skeptical, which I understood as someone who had an eye for questioning cemented truths.

### **Interpretation Through Torpefication: Stung by the Torpedo Fish**

Decades later, as I started taking classes in my doctoral program and became exposed to different possibilities regarding education, I asked myself another layer of questions about the meaning and impact of my video gaming experiences. I connected one text in particular to my ActRaiser memory. Reading Ann Diller's concept of torpefication helped me gain a new understanding of that memory. Diller (1998) defines torpefication as "the shock of realizing we did not know what we thought we knew" (1998). Torpefication is a physical reaction to the realization of our own ignorance. She derives this term from Plato's image of being shocked by a torpedo fish, commonly referred to as a stingray (Plato, n.d.). Beyond the shock, being torpified "bears close family resemblances to the ability to be awed, to be surprised, to be astonished, to be moved in a deeply moral, or ethical, or aesthetic, or epistemological, or ontological way" (p. 8). Diller writes that through torpefication individuals will "almost inevitably experience perspectival shifts" (p. 8). I made sense of torpefication through my ActRaiser experience. Back then the swirling questions in my head had disoriented me, they

affected me to the point where I had to seek answers. Diller qualifies this search as becoming a “philosopher of one’s own education” (p.1). The new meaning I made of this experience fueled my research interest. Interpreting my ActRaiser through torpefication opened up possibilities. I want to dive deeper into the study of my video gaming experiences to better understand that medium. I want to explore video games and their culture to improve players’ and people’s lives. Making connections between video games and questioning power, culture, and society brought together two of my interests and passions. At that point, I weaved my journey into academia with video games, stories, and critical pedagogy.

### **From Curiosity to Fury**

Early in my research I read different theories about video gaming. While they all contributed to a better understanding of the medium, I found that a crucial aspect of the discussion on video gaming was absent: the core of the research did not include players’ voices. The behemoth theory of gamification exemplifies this absence. Proponents of gamification define this theory as “the use of video game elements in non-gaming systems to improve user experience (UX) and user engagement” (Deterding, Dixon, Nacke, O’Hara, and Sicart, 2011, p.1). Such video game elements include points, badges, and animations. The problem with gamification is that it reduces video games to an appeal factor, to a shiny ‘game layer’ (McBride & Nolan, 2014, p. 596), on top of perpetuating unexamined processes of play. Bogost captures the superficial aspect of gamification through his own definition of the term, “gamification is marketing bullshit, invented by consultants as a means to capture the wild, coveted beast that is videogames

and to domesticate it for use in the grey, hopeless wasteland of big business, where bullshit already reigns anyway” (para.5). Bogost’s definition offers a critical perspective on gamification. It shines light on the fact that those in power, big businesses, syphon the image of video games to use it for their own benefit without regard for the video game medium and its community. Gamification is not about understanding the experiences of players in a critical way in order to rethink the world outside of gaming or imagine different possibilities for our society. Gamification is about updating already-existing systems without concerns for justice or the video gaming culture. Gamification is about using games as lures to continue doing what has always been done. For example, gamifying the classroom may mean replacing bubbling right answers on a worksheet with clicking right answers on a colorful screen. There are no meaningful changes involved. Through gamification, “tomorrow becomes the perpetuation of today” (Freire, 1998, p.103). Gamification translates to a surface study of video games. It ignores social, historical, political, and cultural forces that shape all media. In ignoring these forces, proponents of gamification silence the experiences and voices of players.-My enthusiasm for video gaming research gave way to rage.

Duncan Andrade (2009), a scholar and high school teacher, writes about righteous rage, a rage fueled by injustice. He explains that his students, many of whom are underprivileged, come to his classroom angry. Rage is their emotional response to an unjust system. As a teacher, Duncan Andrade sees his role as connecting that moral outrage to “action aimed at resolving undeserved suffering” (p.181). Stryker (1994) sees rage as a transformative energy. She explains that “through the operation of rage, the



stigma itself becomes the source of transformative power” (p.249). While rage is commonly thought about as a fire or a burning, Stryker offers a different image to capture rage:

I am not the water-  
I am the wave,  
And rage  
Is the force that moves me (p.247).

I make sense of my rage as a reaction to injustice. Proponents of gamification were discarding thought provoking aspects of video games such as torpefication. By using buzzwords such as technology, globalism, and 21st century, proponents of gamification push for a superficial definition of education. Rather than engaging with the electrifying power of video games, they use video games for their own ends. In throwing away the critical power of video gaming, they were throwing away my experiences and any other that did not fit theirs. My rage was a sign of injustice toward schooling practices that remained unchanged, toward the portrayal of video games as mere entertainment, and toward the discarding of my experiences. My rage moved me and pushed me deeper into my research. Rather than a fire that spreads and consumes everything in its wake, the wave is a movement that can't be put out. My rage moves me to act in the world. This project is an action against the forces that work to drain video games out of their critical potential and demean my experiences and the experiences of other players who have grown up with video games. This project is the wave moved by righteous rage crashing against these forces. Through this autoethnographic study, I aim

to show that there are other possibilities for video gaming and education. In doing so, I also open the door for the expression of other accounts.

### **A Culture Shaped by Social Issues, A Force Shaping Players**

While I cherish my video gaming experiences and advocate for the use of video gaming in teaching critical pedagogy, my project does not aim to hide or diminish major issues in the video gaming culture. Such issues are well documented. Video games perpetuate oppressive messages in many ways. I share a few examples below that depict the widespread issues in the video gaming culture: the content of video games, video gaming communities, and treating video game workers as disposable.

#### **Oppressive Content**

The 1982 video game Custer's Revenge (Mystique) places the player in the shoes of General Custer. General Custer, an actual historical figure, is famous for having lost a resounding battle against Native Americans, the battle of Little Bighorn (History.com Editors, 2009). The game, in some twisted way, aims to correct that. The goal of Custer's Revenge is to "navigate a battlefield to have sex with an Indian maiden (...) tied to a post," (Cassidy, 2002, para.1) in other words, to rape her. The 2015 game Hatred (Destructive Creations) showcases another set of connected issues present in and perpetuated through video games. Hatred invites players to take on the role of a mass shooter. Creative director Jarosław Zieliński (Campbell, 2014) explains the rationale behind the game:

The answer is simple really. We wanted to create something contrary to prevailing standards of forcing games to be more polite or nice than they really are or even should be. (...) Yes, putting things simply, we are developing a game

about killing people. But what's more important is the fact that we are honest in our approach. Our game doesn't pretend to be anything else than what it is. (para.7),

Through their content, Custer's Revenge and Hatred reinforce settler colonialism, sexism, and white supremacy. The slew of issues banalized and trivialized in these two games is not an accident. As cultural products, video games are imbued with problematic values that plague our world.

### **Oppressive Communities of Players**

A set of video game players have embraced sexism and white supremacy. This vocal group claims video gaming as their sole property and opposes any other individual or group that claims belonging to the video gaming community. One of the most glaring examples is #gamergate (Griggs, 2014), an internet movement which started with targeting one female video game developer, Zoe Quinn, for what the oppressive group referred to as the corruption of video gaming by female developers (Heron, Belford & Goker, 2014). This movement and its actions then spread to harassing or doxxing any woman defending or connected to Quinn.

### **Oppressive Companies**

Issues in the video gaming culture also affect video game workers. They are treated as a disposable workforce, who is overworked (Fuller, 2017), and for whom overtime is not always paid (Weinberger, 2016). Issues in the culture of these companies do not stop there. A recent report on the culture of Riot Games (D'Anastasio, 2018), developer of League of Legends, one of the most popular games in the world, shows that sexism is an integral part of the company's "bro-culture" (para. 5) One of Riot games'

values and motto is “default to trust”—in other words, assume that your colleagues always have good intentions” (para. 61). A former Riot Games employee shared that she was met with criticism when explaining to male coworkers “why words like “bitch” and “pussy” were gendered insults” (para. 60). She was told she was not abiding by the company’s motto and culture of “defaulting to trust.” She was expected to trust that her co-workers were not using these words as insults. Sexism and neoliberalism are alive and well in the video gaming culture.

My goal is not to demean or ignore these issues. By looking for video gaming elements that lend themselves to teaching critical pedagogy, I do not mean to reduce video games to that aspect. However, as someone who has grown up with this medium, I have experienced questioning and shifts in my thinking that I want to investigate because they are seldom represented in the literature in education and video gaming. This does not erase the multitude of issues tied to video gaming. Moreover, I account for these issues in my findings chapter where I question and weigh my role in perpetuating these forms of oppression.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

(...) for me, someone who the world viewed as male, World of Warcraft provided a space to discover that I felt more comfortable when treated as female. (Dale, 2014, para 1)

People play video games for diverse reasons. Players such as Dale see in video games, and World of Warcraft in particular, a space in which she can be herself. Making sense of what video games bring to their players is intimately linked to their identities,

and to their lives outside of the games they play. Golub (2010) writes that to fully grasp the reach and power of video games we must, as first suggested by Dibbell and Schutz, study video games, not as an isolated space, but as an integrant part of players' lives (p.40). One of his main suggestions in order to conduct anthropological studies of video gaming is to "follow participants (...) across all segments of their life-worlds that are central to their biographies, not merely those that are virtual" (p.40). Golub shatters the cliché of online and offline lives as fragmented worlds by demonstrating that these spaces are intertwined; they inform and influence each other. Gaming does not exist in a vacuum. Video games cannot be understood as geographical spaces, to be fully understood they must be studied as cultural spaces (p.41).

Early sociological and anthropological studies of video gaming focused on ethnographic studies of players' in-game experiences (Chen, 2009; Nardi, 2010). Golub's call highlights the necessity to study players across all facets of their lives to better understand the meaning they draw from video gaming. To achieve this, we need to explore the diversity of stories behind players' gaming experiences. We need to ask who the players are, why they choose to play the games they play, and what they get from them. We can only achieve this by diving into players' intimacy. The goal is not to define the video gaming experience as a monochrome monolith, but rather to explore its complexity and meaning by studying diverse players across gender, race, ability, and other identity markers. My study is one slice of that larger project.

Some scholars have recently started this work by studying video gaming through the lens of feminism (Chess & Shaw, 2015; Lavigne, 2015; Shaw, 2015) and race (Gray,

2014). One of their findings is that, like “any identity, being a gamer intersects with other identities and is experienced in relation to different social contexts” (Shaw, 2012, p.29). This statement further stresses the importance of studying video gaming beyond the pixels on the screen. My study takes up Chess and Shaw’s (2015) call “for other gaming cultures and increased diversity” (p.217) by examining my lived video gaming experiences as a student of critical pedagogy who has grown up with video games.

Hock-Koon (2011) writes that we stand at a new time in video game scholarship, a time in which people who have grown up with video games are now entering academia. There is indeed a growing number of video game players in academia who have conducted research in their culture (Blackmon & Terrell, 2007; Braithwaite, 2015; Campbell & Grieve, 2014; Chen, 2009; Gray, 2014). However, video game players/scholars have seldom written about their own lived experiences.

Autoethnographies are rare. I have found a mere three texts that are referred to as autoethnographies. In the earliest one, Sudnow (1983) writes about his experiences of coming to video gaming as an adult. Throughout his work, he draws on his background and identity as piano player to make sense of his video gaming experiences. My project builds on his work by bringing in a different perspective on video gaming through my identities as an immigrant, a non-Muslim Arab, and other factors that vary from Sudnow’s identities. For example, there was no internet at the time of Sudnow’s study and therefore no online video games. Video gaming then is not video gaming now. That difference alone is worthy of prompting another autoethnographic study on video gaming.

Bissell (2011) also wrote about his own experiences playing video games. He describes his experiences playing video games through two interlocked entry points. The first is his own lived experiences playing video games. The second entry point is his interviewing of game designers such as Cliff Bleszinski of Epic Games and Jonathan Blow, an independent designer. He uses these interviews to voice his own experiences and reflect on them.

My project differs from Bissell's in many ways. While I grew up on a mix of computer and console games, I have not owned a console in over twenty years. Bissell solely plays console games. He is not a PC gamer. While some games are available on both format, PC and console platforms offer different possibilities for players such as modding, the possibility for PC players to modify components of their game. My study will add another layer of complexity to the scholarship on video gaming by bringing an autoethnographic account of PC games, especially World of Warcraft. This is also another major difference with Bissell's experience. He describes WoW as "less a video game than a digital board game" and a game he "very much dislikes" (p.40). WoW has rhythmized my life since I started playing it in 2007. WoW has been the main game I have played for over 10 years. While WoW is my main game, it is not the only one I play. Like Bissell who describes GTA IV (Rockstar North, 2008) as his favorite game, having a main game does not necessarily mean we do not play other ones. My study will cover several games, many of which I played decades before the release of WoW and others during the time I played WoW.

Chen's (2012) study is the third piece that is referred to as an autoethnography of video gaming. While Chen's work revolves around his experience as a WoW player, he centered his research on his raiding team and set the scope of his study to in-game interactions solely within WoW. While some see his work as autoethnographic, Chen instead describes it as "following the tradition of online games ethnography" (p.159). As a matter of fact, he dedicates a mere seven page "mini chapter" (p.159) to the tensions between his identities as a researcher, gamer, and educator. He discusses these tensions within the boundaries of in-game interactions with his raidmates and does not extend his reflections beyond this scope. The confinement of his identities to this short section shows that, while his experiences as a raider played a role in his study, they did not constitute the core of it. I do not label his work as autoethnographic, this does not undercut in any ways the value of his study. As a matter of fact, his work has served to inspire mine.

The specificities and intersections of my identities (immigrant, father, and all other facets of my being) will be central to my work. These identities are either not shared or not foregrounded in Sudnow's, Bissell's, or Chen's work. Moreover, the scope of my work in terms of time length (I cover the thirty plus years I have been playing) and reach of the observation field (my lived experiences expand beyond the pixels on the screen) are unique to my study. Therefore, my methodology for this project adds another layer of complexity to the video gaming scholarship.

The goal of my research is to better understand the video game culture and tap into it to offer critical possibilities for our world. I have found in my experiences ways to



make our world a more just place. I was also mindful that my relationship with video games put me in a position where I had to account for problems and critiques of a medium that contains and propagates a multitude of messages, some, if not many, harmful. The chronological component in my study was important. I investigated how my becoming a student of critical pedagogy shaped my lived video gaming experiences. I wanted to know to which extent my lived video gaming experiences were informed by critical pedagogy. I wanted to investigate my reflections, actions, and silences as I played and navigated video gaming in and off the screen. This study represents an important contribution to a larger whole, one voice in a larger discussion. My study is also cathartic as I told and analyzed my stories of video gaming. By examining my stories, I am giving them visibility, in doing so I worked to legitimize and validate my experiences.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, I used autoethnographic research methods to explore what video games mean to me and what they have contributed to in my life. I researched my own experiences as a video gamer player whose identity as a student of critical pedagogy has triggered questions and inquiries. As a student of critical pedagogy, I understand that the relationship between players and video games is dynamic, fluid, and reciprocal. The following questions guided my research:

1. How do I navigate the video gaming culture as a student of critical pedagogy?
2. In what ways do video games lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy?

## **Overview of the Chapters**

Chapter one is an introduction to this study. In chapter two, I show how gaining the identity of student of critical pedagogy has helped me examine my schooling and educational experiences. I did so by reviewing the literature on critical pedagogy and drawing on my own stories of schooling. I use Freire's (2009) concept of the 'banking system,' a concept of education in which "knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p.72). These stories rely on my experiences as an Arab student in the French public school system, the country where I grew up. I used the lens of critical pedagogy to move from a naïve understanding (Freire, 2009), of my schooling and educational experiences to a more complex and systemic understanding of these experiences. This chapter also acts as a blueprint for the examination of my video gaming experiences through the lens of critical pedagogy.

In chapter three, I go over the methodology I employed for this project: autoethnography. I start by describing the different types of autoethnography and explaining the specificities of personal narrative and reflexive ethnography, the two types I employed. I then described my methods of data collection, the writing of epiphanies by using writing as a form of inquiry, and a documentation of my current video gaming experiences through field notes and journaling. I close this chapter by writing about the validity of my methodology, a method that is still controversial for proponents of canonical research.

Chapter four answers my first research question: How do I navigate the video gaming culture as a student of critical pedagogy. I drew on the analysis of my epiphanies, field notes, and journaling to establish meaningful themes. I had initially thought of presenting my findings in two themes: the ways I consent to oppressive forces in the video gaming culture and the ways I resist these forces. However, this study exposed a rift in how I thought of myself and how I acted in my video gaming experiences. I unveiled a chasm between my identity as a video game player and that of student of critical pedagogy during my journaling and field noting. I use the concept of enchantment to describe how my previously unexamined experiences worked to blind me to the multiple issues I engaged with. To do justice to the movement triggered by this study, I present my findings to my first research question in a dynamic format. I first share the ways in which I consented to the oppressive culture of video gaming. I then expose the ways in which I thought I resisted these forces. I conclude this chapter by wording how, after exposing the enchantment, I worked to reconcile the two identities at the core of this project: student of critical pedagogy and video game player.

In chapter five, I answer my second research question: In what ways do video games lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. I use the concept of dismantling the clock to explain how this study worked as the careful examination of my experiences. Through the work of clockmaker, I identified four cogwheels that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. This chapter is my re-assemblage of these cogwheels in alignment with critical pedagogy.

I conclude this dissertation in my sixth chapter. I start by summarizing my findings. I include recommendations for future research and implications for practice. I end this chapter and my work by sharing the limits of this study and my closing thoughts.

## CHAPTER II

### BECOMING A STUDENT OF CRITICAL PEDAGOGY: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE ON CRITICAL PEDAGOGY

#### **Introduction**

Becoming a student of critical pedagogy has triggered, informed, and shaped the questioning of my life starting with my schooling experiences and expanding to other experiences such as my video gaming. This process has introduced questions that have troubled my identities, experiences, and ways of seeing and being in the world. In this chapter I write about becoming a student of critical pedagogy through the review of the literature on critical pedagogy. Kincheloe (2008) writes that “all descriptions of critical pedagogy—like knowledge in general—are shaped by those who devise them and the values they hold” (p.5). Drawing a cemented picture of critical pedagogy is impossible. Definitions are imprinted with the author’s experiences. Therefore, my understanding of critical pedagogy will share common points with my readers’ understanding. It may also differ on other points.

I write about my becoming a student of critical pedagogy by weaving scholarship and my stories of schooling. My goal is to translate my journey into critical pedagogy through pivotal stories that I interpret or reinterpret through scholarship. My stories serve two purposes. The first is to “infuse writing with an intimacy that often is not there when there is just plain theory” (hooks, 2010, p.50). I create this intimacy by crafting stories of

my schooling experience. I invite you into my world by wording it (Rose as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003).

The second purpose in using stories is to use storytelling and critical pedagogy as a form of healing. Some of the stories I share translate difficult moments that have hurt and shaped me as a child and continue to influence me as an adult. I use stories to show how the critical writing of these stories serves as a “therapeutic” tool (Poulos, 2010, p.76). I write these stories by relying on the works of critical pedagogues who have influenced me in this critical journey. These include Paulo Freire, Henry Giroux, and bell hooks. I braid their work around my stories. Doing so has allowed me to become a student of critical scholarship. It helped me move from understanding my experiences as solely saying something about me and my worth or unworthiness to understanding the social, cultural, and political backdrop that shaped these experiences. This critical understanding has empowered me to address these issues.

Through this chapter, I am laying the ground for writing and reinterpreting my stories of video gaming through the lens of critical pedagogy. This chapter shows how gaining the identity of student of critical pedagogy has helped me examine important moments of my schooling and education. In this review of critical pedagogy, I show how making sense of these experiences through critical pedagogy has opened a space for me to act in the name of creating a more just world. By making sense of critical pedagogy through my schooling experiences and describing the ensuing movements in my thinking, I set the grounds for examining my video gaming experience and exposing the movements that resulted from this study.

## **The Social World**

Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right.  
Shining black shoes stomp their path in flawless rhythm.  
Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right.  
The military parade is on. The symbol, the blazon of a country.  
Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right.  
Stop.  
Uniformed and perfectly groomed, they swing their weapons to their other flank.  
Go.  
Left. Right. Left. Right. Left. Right.  
Wooden weapons. Real pride. ROTC teenagers. Real military hunger.

I was an ESOL teacher when I first set foot on the campus of an American high school. I was shocked to see a group of fourteen-year-olds in military uniforms ordered around by a slightly less young leader in that space. This was an aberration. Military education in a high school does not exist in France. I asked my fellow teachers about what I was witnessing. It took a discussion for me to understand that ROTC was an actual school program, that it was present in most high schools across the country, that militarizing youth minds was a state sponsored goal. This moment sent me in a spin. The only countries I knew of with such programs were totalitarian regimes which indoctrinated youths. There, the young were portrayed as disposable. A strong sense of honor shaped by powerful autocrats was instilled in these young minds in order to legitimize sending their bodies to war. The message I had learned in France was that youth in the military is an antidemocratic sign.

The surprise did not stop there. What I understood as a clash between democratic ideals and military presence in schools was seen as ‘normal’ by my coworkers. It made sense to them. “This is just how we do things” (p.19). Schwalbe (2007) uses this sentence

to translate how decisions made by those shape our society become invisible. With time these decisions become habits. In turn, these habits become norms and part of our belief system. We accept them without questioning them. This “consent” is “given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971, p.12). My coworkers saw state sponsored military education as ‘natural’ as the air they breathe. This is what Schwalbe describes as the social world. A world shaped by people in power. A social construction in which the builders and their intent disappear from public sight, from public debate, for public thought. ROTC programs do more than normalize the presence of the military in schools, they play a part in normalizing militarization in all facets of American society. I came to recognize that students in the ROTC program do learn about leadership and a certain idea of service. But this program cannot be detached from the impact the normalization of militarization does on a national and international level.

For me, a French citizen, someone who has been socialized differently, aspects of the American culture that clash with my own stand out. I noticed other instances of the normalization of the military in the US. Take the case of November 11th. In the United States, this holiday celebrates veterans, people who have risked their lives in wars. In France, on that same day, France commemorates the end of World War I. While subtle, the differences between these two messages are meaningful. Celebrating the people who fought contributes to honoring and elevating the image of warriors in terms of honor, pride, and sacrifice. Commemorating the end of a war sends a different message about war: that it needs to stop. Such educational messages, whether they take place in schools



or not helped me understand why the US military budget is larger than that of China, Saudi Arabia, Russia, United Kingdom, India, France, Germany, and Japan combined (U.S. defense spending compared to other countries, 2017). All these messages contribute and reinforce the will of those in power, their desire to have a military force handy to serve their purpose.

Writing about the ROTC experience helped me identify the invisible messages that establish the place of the military in American culture. By reflecting on these experiences, I came to understand essential social rules that regimented the country where I now live and the one I grew up in. Witnessing the marching of youth in schools was not the result of purchasing uniforms and slapping them on teenagers. The overlap between public schooling and the military is the result of shared beliefs (Schwalbe, 2007, p.15). The world we inhabit is not merely made of atoms and molecules. Rules that made possible the presence of the military in schools and therefore the importance of the military in US society correspond to the ideas and ideals of people who can make such rules. In turn, these systems and rules come to shape the beliefs of the larger public. The power to shape the rules gives the possibility of those who hold such power to create schools and societies that reinforce their ideas and ideals. With time, these decisions become shared belief, become the norm, and become invisible even to those who did not play a role or have a voice in bringing these rules into existence. This is the case even when these rules and systems go against the interests of those who believe in them. Gramsci (1971) uses the term “hegemony” (p.12) to describe the domination of one group above others. Dominant groups achieve hegemony through either consent or

coercion to legitimate ‘common sense,’ a social, cultural, and economic order of the world that benefits the dominant group. What holds this social construction together is not the asphalt of our roads or the cement of our buildings. It is the invisibility of the ideas that compose it. All societies are built on ideas that become norms. No social system can exist without them (Johnson, 2014). Because I was brought up in a different country with different norms and habits, American norms and habits that differ from mine stand out like a sore thumb. My ROTC experience triggered questions. Learning about critical pedagogy gave me vocabulary to identify power and question its use in shaping schools, education, and our world.

### **The Question of Power**

Neutral, objective education is an oxymoron. Education cannot exist outside of relations of power, values, and politics (Giroux, 2013, p.192)

My journey into critical pedagogy has exposed many of the messages I grew up with as mirages. “There is no place for politics in schools” is a message I heard from teachers, parents, administrators, friends, and media. Education was presented to me as a golden ticket to lift myself up, the guarantee of a bright future. My parents, immigrants from Algeria, taught me that degrees would allow me to access a stable life. They talked about schools, grades, and diplomas as noble, essential, and a representation of my intelligence, of my worth. While degrees offer many advantages, such as better chances of finding a job and ensuring a stable economic future, this message is incomplete and works to hide the power and politics behind schools and education. My parents participated in spreading this message, not because they were in on it, but because this is

how the world, the social world had been presented to them. Without critical ways of seeing the world they were not able to challenge that message.

Through becoming a student of critical pedagogy, I have reinterpreted my stories of schooling and education to expose themes of domination that run through the history of schooling such as “school as managers of public thought” or “schools as engines of a consumer society” (Spring, 2011). Giroux writes that there is no such thing as neutral education, that the decisions that shape schools are a reflection of politics, values, and power. Critical pedagogy gave me the language to understand school and the world as a social construction, as shaped by people with power. Becoming a student of critical pedagogy has granted me knowledge, language, and questions to expose incomplete and/or hurtful surface messages I had been bombarded with. The questioning of the social world has helped me understand that my schooling experiences were not neutral, that they were shaped by many unseen forces (Kincheloe, 2008, p.71). This questioning should not be understood as the demonizing of schools. As a student of critical pedagogy, I see in education and schools a tool to promote democratic values and democratization, that is to create a society that is fair and just and that allows everyone to live free, full, and dignified life (Schwalbe, 2007; Shapiro, 2005). As my ROTC story highlights, questioning power is essential in assessing whether schooling is indeed contributing to the creation of a more just world. As a student of critical pedagogy, I want to ensure that the rules and systems in place are working for the benefit of all, not only for the few shaping the social world.

Education plays a major role in shaping our shared beliefs, in shaping the social world. One of the ways schools shape students' understanding of the world and place in it is through its portrayal of knowledge, the way schools teach what it means to know something. There are two critical questions that revolve around knowledge which I will use to anchor my becoming a student of critical pedagogy. The first is 'what is knowledge?' or what does it mean to know something. The second is 'whose knowledge is valued and deemed valid' and therefore whose knowledge is devalued and demeaned. I tackle these questions separately in the next section by relying on Freire's (2009) concept of the 'banking system' (p.72), a system Freire exposes as harmful to democratic values in which knowledge is depicted as passive, detached, and hermetic. Through the banking process, the world is presented as static, a world in which students have no say, instead of a social construction, a world in which students have power. Through the banking process, the social construction of the world is hidden. Ideas and systems that are harmful become difficult to see, challenge, and change. Therefore, the social world and any injustice it harbors continue to exist. It is in the democratic hope of exposing these injustices that I take on these questions of knowledge. I do so by sharing stories of my schooling experiences that conveyed harmful messages and hurt my sense of agency and identity. I show how critical pedagogy has helped me reinterpret these stories in the larger context of power and politics.

## What is Knowledge?

### What It Means to Learn in Mr. Charles 7th Grade History Class

Mr. Charles: "Title in red. Centered. Write *bla bla bla*."

As instructed, I take my red pen and write that exact title as neatly as possible. A perfectly written *B*, then comes an *L*, and an *A*. I write the next two words with the same attention. Mr. Charles will pick up our textbooks and check colors and formats as he does every week. I know my parents will get mad if any teacher says anything negative about my work. And so I pen the title with great focus and a tint of fear.

Mr. Charles: "Now, green pen for the first level subheading. No indentation. Write *bla bla bla*." I switch pens and continue working. I want to take my time to write clearly. My sixth grade French teacher had told me that my handwriting was poor. She instructed me to stop writing in cursive and only write in print. This, she said, would help me form better looking letters even if it took me longer to write. I look around to make sure that I am not falling behind. The other students might be faster than me. Writing in cursive is the norm in French schools. I am the only one person I know who writes in print.

Mr. Charles: "Now, black pen for the second level subheading. It must be indented by 3 centimeters. Write *bla bla bla*." The monotony of copying titles is rhythmed? by the mechanical act of switching of pens. This pseudo-physical activity is the only thing that keeps me and many of my classmates from falling asleep in this history/geography combo class. Cemented behind his desk, Mr. Charles moves on to dictating his notes for that subsection. Blue. Copying notes has to be done in blue. I focus

on Mr. Charles' voice and write the words as I hear them. I stay silent. No one ever says a word in history/geography class. In between our note copying, one of us may be called to the board to point at an answer on the giant map. Stepping up to the front of the class was terrifying. We preferred to stay invisible.

I did not think of Mr. Charles as a mean teacher and despite the rigor and extensiveness of the note copying, I did not think of him as a strict teacher either. During recess, the words we used to describe him and his class were boring, low energy, annoying, and soporific. On test days, these words echoed with bitterness and irritation...

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*What was the second subheading again? Why can't I remember? I did study yesterday. I always learn these lessons by heart. I am a good student. I make very good grades no matter the class. Why doesn't that subheading come back to me?* I read over the first subsection of notes I spat back out word for word hoping it will lead me to figuring out what that second subheading is.

Figure 2. Mr. Charles Class

<p>Yacine Kout</p> <p>19 septembre 1989</p> <p>Contrôle d'histoire</p> <p>Question: What is Bla bla bla?</p> <p>Bla bla bla</p> <p>Bla bla bla bla bla bla</p> <p>Bla bla bla bla bla bla</p> <p>Bla bla bla bla bla bla. Bla bla bla bla bla bla Bla. bla bla bla bla bla.</p> <p>Bla bla bla bla bla bla. Bla bla bla bla bla bla. Bla bla bla bla bla bla.</p> <p>Bla bla bla bla bla bla.</p> <p>??? ??? ??? ??? ??? ???</p>
--

No. It's not coming back. What's going to happen if I don't make a good grade? I better not think about that. Just read it again Yacine. It's bound to come back... eventually \*gulp.\* I look around. Everybody else has their nose buried in their sheet of paper. What's happening? Slimane had told me that sooner or later the streak of great grades would end. "20/20's belong in elementary school," he said. Seventh grade is a different story. The words and sentences I cannot remember, those I was to write on my test, are now goosebumps on my skin. If I get a bad grade the glasses on my nose will no longer be seen as the mark of my so-called intelligence. Instead, they will paint me as a good for

nothing, someone who can't play sports and who isn't even good at school. I am overwhelmed with shame and fear. There is no room for bad grades at home.

### **Making Sense of Mr. Charles' Teaching: Banking System and Schooling.**

My experience in Mr. Charles' class is not an anomaly. This experience represents what many have come to think of as learning: absorbing facts detached from our lives and spitting them back out in the same way they were thrown at us. In the USA, this is usually done by finding and bubbling the right answer. While I never had to bubble answers on a test (multiple choice tests did not exist when I was schooled in my native France), many of my tests required me to write word for word or paraphrase what I was dictated in class. Like hooks (2010), I found that many of my classes were "a dehumanizing space" (p.34), a space where my thoughts and questions were not welcome. This model of learning constitutes the norm in the USA. People in and out of schools have come to see this way of learning as the only way of learning. Freire (2009) coins that system the 'banking system' (p.72).

**The banking system.** In my middle school, Mr. Charles' class and other classes like his were notorious for the pain they inflicted on their students. We, the students, were seen as empty objects who had nothing to bring to the class. We were treated as ignorant, knowledgeable only if we followed directions, applied the colored template mindlessly, copied notes religiously, and regurgitated them verbatim. Mr. Charles' class stood out among other classes in which the teacher adopted the banking concept of education because it was the first one in which the entire 55 minutes were spent on listening to his words and copying them according to a strict color coding. Another telling memory of



that class is that of my friend Jérôme. He would secretly record Mr. Charles' lecture on his mini-cassette recorder. On test days, he would slyly run the earphone cable through his sleeve right before class. During the test, he would play the recorder in his pocket and find the portion of the recording that corresponded to that test's lesson. In banking, learning is synonymous with repeating. Students' thoughts, experiences, and questions are erased from the learning process. Jérôme's body was a mere conduit for Mr. Charles' words. Jérôme was absent from his test as we were absent from that class. Getting good grades in Mr. Charles' class and in the banking system is a reward for complying with a system that objectifies and silences students.

In the banking system, schools are modeled after the factory model. The teacher is the factory worker. The students are the inanimate products built by the teacher. The setup of the classroom, lines of desks facing the all-knowing teacher, reinforces the centrality of the teacher's knowledge and reciprocally the ignorance of the students. In Mr. Charles' classroom, all the desks were facing him. He was the center of the attention, the center of teaching. This layout reinforced the idea that learning was a transaction that originates from the teacher and goes toward the students. Freire (2009) states that "in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (p.72). Through this idea, students adopt an inanimate state which equates them to empty inanimate vessels. The act of teaching translates to the teacher "depositing" their knowledge into "depositories," passive students who are reduced to objects (Freire, 2009, p.72). The finalization of the learning transaction in Mr. Charles' class occurred during

tests when students were to present him with his own words, organized in the same way he introduced them to us, using the same color coding he ruled his class through. In schooling, conforming is key. Students are labeled as 'educated' only after they can replicate what they are told and shown. As Freire (1998) writes, "there is no education here. Only domestication" (p.57).

Invisible messages such as the place of students in the classroom, the unworthiness of their experiences, and their absence in the learning process are referred to as the "hidden curriculum." Vallance (2006) writes that the "the functions of this hidden curriculum have been variously identified as the inculcation of values, political socialization, training in obedience and docility, the perpetuation of traditional class structure - functions that may be characterized generally as social control" (p.79). These are teachings that are not written in lesson plans. They correspond to teachings that students receive through less visible or obvious means. Dewey shows how the layout of a classroom and the positioning of desks sends messages about the place of students in their learning. After having visited a few furniture dealers looking for desks at which students could work together, one of these dealers made the following comments "I am afraid we have not what you want. You want something at which the children may work; these are all for listening" (Dewey, 1900, p.32). The listening of students referred to here is not one in which interlocutors listen to one another in order to communicate. The listening the furniture dealer was referring to is a listening which situates students as subordinates, incapable of producing anything of value. Dewey (1900) continues:

with its rows of ugly desks placed in geometrical order, crowded together so that there shall be as little moving room as possible, desks almost all of the same size, with just space enough to hold books, pencils and paper, and add a table, some chairs, the bare walls, and possibly a few pictures, we can reconstruct the only educational activity that can possibly go on in such a place. It is all made "for listening"--because simply studying lessons out of a book is only another kind of listening; it marks the dependency of one mind upon another. The attitude of listening means, comparatively speaking, passivity, absorption; that there are certain ready-made materials which are there, which have been prepared by the school superintendent, the board, the teacher, and of which the child is to take in as much as possible in the least possible time. (p.32)

Through a critical questioning of the classroom space, the concepts of the banking system and hidden curriculum expose educational elements that stretch further than tests and teaching strategies. They include elements such as space, furniture design, classroom layout, and many more. A critical analysis of space shows that in the traditional layout of the classroom, students are more likely to see themselves as powerless in the classroom and to become powerless out of schools. An educational system that rewards students for silencing themselves will produce citizens who have difficulties seeing themselves as people who can bring value, who can bring something new to our world. Such citizens will be less likely to challenge power in society and bring about a more just world to existence. By presenting knowledge as oriented from the teacher to the student, the banking system and the hidden curriculum are more likely to create obedient students. These youths will be highly unlikely to ask critical questions, highly unlikely to see the world as a social construct, highly unlikely to address issues of power in the world, and therefore highly unlikely to work to make this world a better place for all.

**Systems not people.** Students are not the only people suffering from this dehumanizing system of learning. The following story showcases the reach of the

banking system and its objectifying of teachers. Due to the impossibility of translating a specific French pun into English, I decided to write the first paragraph of my story in French and translate it in English. I underlined the pun to help my readers see the connection.

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Vous savez ce que je fais ce soir? Je dîne à Meaux. Oui, je dynamo. Un ange passe. Vous comprenez? Il y a Dynamo Kiev contre Paris Saint Germain ce soir. Je vais regarder le match.

Do you know what I am doing tonight? I dine in Meaux . Yes, I dynamo. An awkward silence settles in. Do you understand? Paris Saint Germain is playing against Dynamo Kiev tonight. I am going to watch the game.

He laughs. Never mind that he is the only one. He loved his pun. One of the lamest puns I have heard in a while. I do not say anything though. I started this job a few days ago. It is not my place to say something. But boy! Did HE just say that? Did Mr. Charles just crack a joke? And laugh? Eight years ago, I spent two straight years in his classroom. I cannot remember him smile once. Today I am his co-worker and I am confused about who this person is.

His eyes shine as he forks a few of his carottes vichyssoises. Where was this teacher when I was in the 7th grade? Who is that person? That question burns my lips but I cannot ask it. I never ask him. Mrs. Benamou rolls her eyes as she puts her spoon down. She taught me French and Latin in middle school. She is sitting next to me. She asks me to excuse Mr. Charles and his poor, poor sense of humor. “He has always been like that,” she says.

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Working in the same space as Mr. Charles was a troubling experience. Having lunch with him shattered the image I had of him. He was not funny but he was joyous. His sense of humour revolved around crafting puns that never quite hit the mark with his audience. This experience made me see him in a different light. I understood that his voice was not present in his teaching. When he was my teacher, he was absent from his very own classroom. In many ways, he was similar to my friend Jérôme. His tied-to-the-desk-body was a conduit for the system. However, people are not robots. Working within a dehumanizing system does not make robots out of people. Even in the most debilitating tasks, we strive to reclaim our humanity by making meaning out of them. Mr. Charles was the only teacher I had that used color coding with such precision and thoroughness. Maybe that was his way of reclaiming ownership or agency in his work, of reclaiming some aspect of himself in his teaching. That coding was a creative touch and I did find beauty in using colors to convey meaning. I see in my quasi-fascination with this color coding a sign of the “quintessential human need to make or find meaning” (Shapiro, 2005, p.7). My capacity to find something meaningful in such a mindless class speaks to the human capacity to find meaning in situations that do not lend themselves to it. There was nothing in that class that invited student input. Even when reduced to an object by these pedagogical practices, I found something meaningful. I found an escape. This meaning making was a form of resistance to the situation I was placed. I resisted my objectification. This was a sign of criticality.

The banking system hurts students by reducing them to objects, by negating their voice and treating them and their lives as worthless, but as this story shows, it also impacts teachers. Freire (1998) writes that the banking system impacts the learner and the teacher (p.79). hooks (2010) further tells us that “no blame can be attributed to the huge body of educators who simply taught as they were taught” (p.29). The responsibility does not lie with the teachers for whom the schooling factory is the only model they know. These teachers cannot implement another model of learning if they only know one model of teaching. For teachers who have not been taught to question power in education, teaching only makes sense as the act of replicating what they have known. Kincheloe (2008) writes that teachers involved in the banking system do not intentionally hurt students; instead, they merely follow the directions of their administrators and “the rules of the system” (p.8). Giroux gives the example of Florida state legislators who in 2006 “outlawed historical interpretation in public schools, arguing that American history must be taught as a series of facts, rather than as a matter of interpretation, reasoned debate, and accumulation of evidence” (Giroux, 2013, p.32). Governor Bush who signed that education bill into law declared that “American history shall be viewed as factual, not as constructed (Jensen, 2006, para.4). Moreover, the law states that “factual history shall be viewed as knowable, teachable and testable” (HB7087e3, 2006, p.44). This example shows that people in power define knowledge in schools by making laws regarding its teaching and representations. They also create systems which assess knowledge according to their interpretation of it. If knowledge is a series of facts, then assessing learning is about spitting these facts out as they were taught. In creating such systems,

they validate certain ways of knowing and outlaw others. This decision made by state legislators reinforces the idea that students have nothing to bring to the classroom, that they should stay silent and learn facts by heart in order to regurgitate them for a test. This law translates the grip of powerful people on schools and their hold through that institution on creating and perpetuating a social world that preserves their views and interests. Through that decision, Florida state legislators reaffirmed that in their view, knowledge is not to be debated or discussed. It is to be passed down from textbooks to students through teachers. Via such a system, young people are to understand that their place in the classroom and in the world is to adapt to norms they had no say in creating and that the best future they can aim for is attainable by complying to that system.

To add to the injustice of such a system, a critical analysis of knowledge construction in schools reveals that this view of knowledge and schooling is not present across all layers of society. Anyon (table 1) conducted a study that shows the impact of class on how students understand knowledge and see themselves in relationship to knowledge.

Table 1. Key Points of Anyon's Study on Social Class and School Knowledge

Question	Working-class schools	Middle-class school	Affluent professional school
What is knowledge?	"You gain facts, like." Some children answer they didn't know "The three R... Miss [P] said if we don't have the three Rs, we can't do anything... Say if you work in a store you gotta add up prices."	"It means you're intelligent." "When you study." "To know things.:"	"The way you think. Yes, the way you think." "It's when you know something-you can be a great scientist." "You think up ideas and then find things wrong with those ideas."
Where does knowledge come from?	"Teachers." "Dictionary."	"From the old times." "From libraries."	"From reading and learning." "Anybody, if they're really willing to learn something, can really go far in that subject(...)" "From going places."
Could you make knowledge?	75% of children answered no. 20% answered they did not know. 5% answered yes.	55% answered yes. 45% of children answered no.	80% of children answered no. 20% answered no.

Note: Adapted from *Social class and school knowledge*, by Anyon 1981.

Anyon's findings are troubling because they show us that the voices and stories which are the most needed to understand and address inequalities of wealth in our society come from students who are taught not to see themselves as knowledge producers, not to see themselves as capable of bringing something to our world. On the other hand, students from affluent neighborhoods are taught in a way through which they see themselves as worthy and capable of bringing something new to this world. These students, who are most likely to be distant from issues tied to poverty, see themselves as knowledge producers and are most likely to aim for and reach positions of power as youths and adults, as students and professionals. This rift contributes to wealth inequities in American society as the class of people who have power continue making decisions



and shaping society without the input of people who are most hurt by unjust systems. This critical analysis of knowledge shows us that instead of working as “the great equalizer” (Mann as cited in Martinez-Blanco & Waldo, 2011, para. 4), a ‘common sense’ understanding of education, schools are spaces which reproduce and perpetuate inequalities.

The banking system is a complex cogwheel in a larger system. It works to rob lower and middle class students of their stories and agency. By doing so, it keeps a socio-political economic order that is unjust to the youths it hurts. That system does nothing to nurture young people’s power and energy to impact the world and make it a more just place. The banking system limits our understanding of education and prevents youths from seeing value in their perspectives and in their stories. This system values one way of knowing the world, one voice, as determined by people in power. In that process this system demeans and negates every other way of being or interpreting the world. In the next section, I explore the question of whose knowledge is conveyed through the banking system and analyze how it devalues other knowledges.

### **Whose Knowledge?**

Whether one is teaching in Bangladesh or Bensonhurst, Senegal or Shreveport, East Timor or West New York, education is a political activity (Kincheloe, 2008, p.8),

My K-12 schooling experience took place in France. As Kincheloe writes, no matter where a student is schooled, education is always a political activity and project. Since education is a political activity, we need to question whose politics and whose

knowledge are implemented through the educational system. In the next story, I tackle the critical question of whose knowledge is taught in schools by sharing an experience that impacted me more than twenty years ago. While it touches on a wide range of issues such as power, politics, knowledge, silencing, and identity, I foreground my analysis around the question of whose knowledge I was taught.

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***September 1993.** Twelfth grade history, finally. Since sixth grade, year after year, we had studied history chronologically as a series of dates and events that inched closer to modern times. At the end of 11th grade, I realized that my senior history class would cover the 1960's. I would learn about Algeria, the country of my parents. At last, I was to learn something about me.*

*I did not know much about Algeria. Conversations on that topic with my parents were few and short lived. My mother would tell me with sparks in her eyes that out of all French colonies, Algeria was the one place France tried the hardest to keep under its control. Algerians fought ruthlessly for their independence. There was a sense of Algeria's worth in my mother's eyes when she spoke about this. Her pride rang in her voice. For her, France's clinging to Algeria was testimony to how important her country is. Our conversations never went further. I did receive other messages about that war though.*

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***Summer 1988.** The Imam's call to prayer reaches the whole neighborhood. It's Friday. Almost everyone is heading to the mosque. I stay at my aunt's house. I speak*

*Arabic, the sacred language of Islam, but I did not grow up with religious rigor. My father put some distance between him and the faith he grew up in since he moved to France. I am alone in front of the TV while my cousins, uncles, and aunts are praying. Some of them are in the mosque. Others are in the prayer room of my aunt's house, a place decorated with golden Arabic calligraphy and layered with beautiful red prayer rugs. The prayer is echoed on the TV as precious Arabic letters slowly form on the screen. The fully shaped words give way to a night scene. The images of a military man painfully crawling in the mud with a rifle on his back appear on the screen and engrave my memory. I am perplexed. I do not understand the connection. I feel weird. I look away.*

*Later that day, I ask my uncle Omar about it. He is friendlier than my father and more knowledgeable than my mother. Speaking of religion was not welcome in my family nucleus. In Algeria, the core family core grew to include cousins, uncles, and aunts. This was an opportunity to ask.*

*"Uncle Omar, why are there images of a military man mixed with the call to prayer on TV? Is that normal?"*

*He smiles, "This was not a military man, Yacine. That was a mujahidin, a freedom fighter, someone who fought to free Algeria from the French, to free Algeria from your country." He laughs.*

*I am confused. My parents are Algerian. My family members are Algerian. I am French. What does that mean about me? I don't know what to say. I don't know what to think. I don't know what to ask. I do not want to keep talking. I do not think I can handle*

*more singling out, more shame and fear. Moreover, the discussion could send ripples to my parents. I would get an earful for asking about this, if not worse. My parents had moved to France because “il y a plus d'opportunités en France qu'en Algérie pour nous et nos futurs enfants.” That was the story. A one sentence story. More of a way to silence than to tell.*

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***June 1994.** My senior year is about to end. Next year, I will head to la Sorbonne Nouvelle to major in English. All my classes will deal with English literature, civilization, and language. No more history classes. But June. It's June. The year is over. We addressed “les trentes glorieuses.” We looked at pictures of politicians to understand the cold war. We drew arrows on maps to cover the trade shifts after decolonization. That was it for the K-12 history curriculum. No trace of the sparks in my mother's eyes. Nothing to help me understand my father's silences. Nothing to clear up my uncle's laugh. Where was the Algerian War of Independence in my class? Where was I? I could go to the library and check out a book about it but what would people think?*

*“What is this Arab boy doing?” Mumbles the suspicious librarian from behind her desk.*

*“Doesn't he know about his history already?” Thinks the person who sees me check out the book.*

*“An 18-year-old that does not know about himself. What a shame!” Says the eyes of the patron as he catches me reading in a corner of the library.*

*I could imagine this but I did not want to hear it. I could not face this. I do not go to the library.*

*A few weeks later, I graduate from high school. I receive my baccalauréat degree. According to the French department of education, I now know something. I guess I do but I don't know about me.*

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### **Making Sense of the Silence on the Algerian War of Independence**

Becoming a student of critical pedagogy has helped me understand the complexities of this part of my life in a way that was not possible without considering issues of power and politics and how they shape knowledge and education. As a teenager, I felt a sense of shame for not knowing the history of Algeria's decolonization, for not knowing this part of my history. I individualized this lack of knowledge. It defined my teenager self. I walked the world as someone who knew he did not know a part of himself. There was a hole in my soul. I felt like a lesser being. I dodged discussions on that topic with my friends, most of them white. I did not want them to know that I did not know. Worse, I did not want to find out they knew more than I did. I was ashamed of what they may think about me. I had a naïve consciousness (Kincheloe, 2008, p.72). Incapable of questioning power, I could only blame myself.

Through critical pedagogy, I understand that the silence in schools around Algeria's War of Independence was a decision made by people in power. That silence was a deliberate omission. Giroux refers to this type of erasing as the "history of forgetting" (Giroux, 2013, p.134) and Paulo Freire calls it a "culture of silence" (in

Giroux, 2013, p.169). Not knowing about my parents' country was not the mere reflection of potential issues or trauma in my family. My ignorance was in part engineered by people in power who silenced this part of French history from public school history books. This story highlights a second important point about the banking system. In addition to stifling students' imagination and potential to change the world, this system presents learning as adopting and conforming to a single way of seeing and understanding the world. I will unpack this single view of the world in American schools. I will share the drastic consequences this view of the world, masquerading as the only view of the world, has on youth.

### **The One View of Seeing the World**

The machinery of permanent education and the public pedagogical relationships these create have become the main framing mechanisms in determining what information gets included, who speaks, what stories are told, what representations translate into reality, and what is considered normal or subversive (Giroux, 2013, p.31)

Schwalbe (2007) writes that it is only “when we try to pull away, to break from the pattern” of the social world that we experience the tangible force of the threads (p.19). This is what happened when in 1998 a Raza studies program was implemented in the Tucson Unified School District (Rao, 2017). This program was created to address the alarming Latinx students drop out rate. Through this program, students of any background could take classes that presented a Latinx perspective on the history of the US. Romero reports that through this program Mexican-American students closed the achievement gap (Romero, 2014) therefore getting closer to fulfilling the promise of

compulsory public education. Despite its obvious success, state legislators and Tom Horne, then superintendent of TUSD, launched a hatred filled multiyear campaign to close the program. By passing House Bill 2281 in 2011, their relentless efforts killed the Raza program citing what Horne saw as “propagandizing,” “brainwashing,” (Lacey, 2011, para.3) and “separatist” (Associated Press, 2017, para.13). Legislators and other people in power have shown that “achievement is irrelevant” to schooling if it does not serve their worldview (Duncan-Andrade, 2014, p.163).

I find three main takeaways from the history and ban of this program. First, they “pulled away” from the hegemonic idea of education, they imagined and implemented another way of doing education by foregrounding a Latinx perspective on the history of this country. Second, by “pulling away” they suffered the hateful backlash of those who held power. Third, in doing so they exposed the power structures that created and held together the current educational system, an educational system that created, supported, and enforced a single view of the world. A view of the world no one was supposed to deviate from. Critical pedagogues have used several terms to describe this politically elevated view of the world such as “Anglo-Eurocentric” (Duncan-Andrade, 2014, p.161) and “white supremacist” (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2017, p.143). I choose to use the term white supremacist as it evokes the racist history of this country and carries a sense of superiority towards other races.

One of the ways this white supremacist view persist is through its invisibility. People who hide behind a supposed neutral way of teaching history do so either because their political and cultural identity is perfectly aligned with it or because they consent to

it. Neutrality is a mirage. Since that perspective is presented as the norm, anything that varies from it is perceived as deviation, as transgression. No matter the successes in improving student graduation, in the eyes of legislators this program was not aligned with what they saw, consciously or not, as the one way of seeing and understanding the world. The message they sent when they outlawed this program was that, no matter how many minoritized students drop out, schools should only teach through the white supremacist lens. This is what I faced when I expected to learn about the Algerian War of Independence. No matter if the silences hurt me and hurt my future, I was to be taught through that lens. The consequences of teaching through this worldview are drastic. They affect students' identity and sense of self-worth. They erase people's histories from textbooks and contribute to their devaluing. I explore these consequences next.

### **Consequences of the “White Supremacist” Lens on Students**

The closing of the Raza studies program prevented all students from learning about the Latinx and indigenous stories of the Americas. These include stories of oppression such as the genocide of indigenous people's stories of resistance such as the courage of Oscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdamez who spoke against poverty. In a district that was serving 61% of Hispanic students (TUSDStats, n.d.) at the time the program was closed, this means that students were deprived of knowledge that represented their culture and their view of seeing the world. Their knowledge was erased. This whitewashing of schooling prevented public school students from being exposed to a critical analysis of history. It prevented youths and adults from engaging with injustices, naming them, and seeking just possibilities. Identity wise, it also prevented them from knowing who their



peoples were, where they came from, what their history was, and understand how they were positioned in the world. These students are more likely to feel and be alienated in schools. Dropping out becomes an option. Doing well in school for students whose history is erased and devalued becomes a debilitating process. Students must adopt and conform to a view of seeing the world that ignores and silences them. Failure to comply and succeed to this system is individualized. It is portrayed as a lack of intelligence by teachers, administrators, and classmates. It can also be lived as a lack of intelligence by the students themselves. Freire (1998) writes that “the role of the dominant ideology is to inculcate in the oppressed a sense of blame and culpability about their situation of oppression” (p.78). Without critical pedagogy, without a questioning of “who has control over the conditions for the production of knowledge, values, and classroom practices” (Giroux, 2011, p.5), the blame is centered on individual students. Their failure is portrayed as the result of their unworthiness. This is the source of the shame I felt when the Algerian War of Independence did not appear in my senior history books. Without critical knowledge, I had individualized a political and social issue. This had damaged my sense of identity and self-worth. Becoming a student of critical pedagogy freed me from the pain. It has granted me access to a questioning of power. In doing so, it has allowed me to start healing.

The critical analysis of my experiences has opened possibilities for educating. Possibilities that are not grounded in domestication and white supremacist ways of seeing the world. Becoming a student of critical pedagogy has reawakened and nourished my imagination. This sense of possibility and imagination is necessary to continue the

process of democratization in the US and beyond, that is to include voices and people in society and address the needs of those who have historically been deprived of access to living a full and dignified life. Without a critical understanding of the powers that shape our world, without a critical assessment of the health of democracies, without a push to address the injustice and oppression the most vulnerable members of our society endure, “tomorrow becomes *the* perpetuation of today” (Freire, 1998, p.103). We can only replicate what we see as ‘normal.’ It is only if we understand the inequities of today that we can challenge, imagine, and enact more just futures. In the next section, I explore this reawakened sense of possibility nurtured by critical pedagogy.

### **Critical Pedagogy as Democratic Imagination: Enacting New Futures**

Imagining different futures is a key component of critical pedagogy. The last scene of the movie *Arizona Dream* (Gurian & Kusturica, 1992) provides a good metaphor to explain this idea. That scene has stayed with me since I first saw it in the mid 1990’s. It intrigued me. I never quite understood it but it spoke to me on some mystic level. The scene depicts a dream in which a younger and an older Inuit character ice fish (regrettably and problematically these indigenous characters are played by white actors Johnny Depp and Jerry Lewis). As they get ready to fish, the two characters chat about halibuts and the fact that, unlike young halibuts, adult halibuts have two eyes on the same side of their head.

Young fisherman: Do the eyes start on either side of the head?

Older fisherman: Yes, it's a very strange fish. When it becomes an adult, one eye moves across, joins the other.

Young fisherman: Why do they do that?

Older fisherman: Maybe it's like a... a badge of maturity. They passed through the nightmare.

Young fisherman: Nightmare?

Older fisherman: The nightmare that separates children from adults.

Years later while being introduced to the writings of Giroux and Freire, this scene, as eerily as it imprinted my memory, came back to me. I draw two connected lessons from that tale. The first is that all children are born with the capacity to see the world through different perspectives. Imagination is therefore a human capacity we are all born with. The second is that becoming an adult means losing the capacity to see the world in different ways, losing the capacity to imagine other possibilities. Becoming an adult is about conforming to a unique predetermined view of seeing the world. For that harmful process to be complete, young people must lose their innate capacity to imagine.

This scene helped me make sense of critical pedagogy and of the damage the current school system causes to our youths. Through schooling, students' innate capacities are diminished. Their sight is restrained, they are less likely to see differently, ask questions, and imagine. In schools, imagination is demonized, damaged, and at times annihilated. By taking away their capacity to imagine, students are rendered voiceless and powerless. This tale also shows that the young are capable of seeing what adults can't. Adults, whose sight is shaped and restrained by the invisible rules and laws of the social world, have difficulty seeing beyond it, have difficulty imagining other possibilities. Children whose sight has not been restricted and damaged by the rules of the social world can bring something new to this world. As hooks (2010) writes "children are organically predisposed to be critical thinkers" (p.7). This capacity for imagination is a tenet of

critical pedagogy. Shapiro (2005) writes, “each generation can and must find new layers of significance and insight into the purpose and quality of our lives” (p.192). Through its nurturing of imagination, critical pedagogy can achieve this goal.

An education anchored in critical pedagogy is a democratic project in which the grasp of power on the social world is made visible. A vision of society in which education is a foundation of democratization. Through it, students’ capacity to see other possibilities is nurtured. Understanding the world as a social construction is a call to question rather than to conform, comply, and replicate. Critical pedagogy is about understanding that rules and laws are not natural but created by people, and about reshaping the social world into a more just place. Realizing that our world is a social construct grants us the possibility, the responsibility, and the emotional push to shape our world. The knowledge exposed through critical pedagogy is not an abstract concept detached from the world. Giroux (2013) writes that “education is not simply about the transmission of knowledge: it is more accurately about the production of subjects, identities, and desires” (p.200). Freire’s concept of praxis best represents this production of subjects, identities, and desires.

### **Praxis**

Critical knowledge is a force, a push to end suffering and oppression in all its forms. Freire’s concept of praxis is the embodiment of informed action in the name of justice. He defines *praxis* as “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (1970, p.79). In *praxis*, reflection and action are linked. Freire does not see reflection and action as two separate entities as if someone could either be a theorist solely

preoccupied by reflection or an activist solely dedicated to action. Reflection and action are not placed in opposition. What Freire tells us is that reflection and action must be connected in order for any type of meaningful change to occur. Through praxis students enact their agency in the world, bring into existence more just possibilities. Freire (2009) uses the term *conscientização* to describe the process of leaving “behind the status of objects to assume the status of historical Subjects” (p.160). *Conscientização* moves students of critical pedagogy in two ways. First, it moves us emotionally as we become conscious that the plagues of the planet are manmade before lifting us with hope as we understand that all human beings have the potential to end oppression in our world (Purpel, 1999). Second, it moves us physically. It moves us into action. Because we understand that all people hold power, students of critical pedagogy bear the responsibility to act and bring our world closer to a just place. Inaction is no longer an option once we realize we possess the tools to end oppression and injustice.

### **Intervention**

Freire (1998) writes about education as being a form of intervention in the world (p.91). This intervention is grounded in the lived experiences of the critical actors. Giroux uses the example of the Occupy movement to illustrate this intervention. The Occupy Movement consisted in protesting “against economic inequality and corporate greed” (Walters, 2011, para. 1). This movement was mostly, but not only, led, generated, populated, and animated by young people. They saw their role as “fighting back against the corrosive power of major banks and multinational corporations over the democratic process (..) and fight(ing) back against the richest 1% of people that are writing the rules

of an unfair global economy that is foreclosing on our future.” (Occupy Wall Street, n.d.). While the movement encountered many challenges, such as governmental repression and use of force to remove protesters, their demand for justice introduced to the American public and to the world the concept of the 1%. That term represents the critical fact that “almost 40% of US wealth is held in the hands of 1% of the population, who are taxed more lightly than the majority of Americans” (Walters, 2011, para.4). By introducing this critical term, the Occupy movement has brought into the common consciousness the concept of wealth inequality and exploitation on a scale that did not exist before the movement. This language is a way to name and make visible power and those hold it (Giroux, 2013, p.148). Today this idea is weaved into the social world. People make sense of inequities through this term. Obviously, we are still working at translating these now popular ideas into rules and laws.

Another achievement of these actions is that they bring about a sense of hope to those who experience these struggles. Giroux (2013) defines hope as “the outcome of those pedagogical practices and struggles that tap into memory and lived experiences, while linking individual responsibility with a progressive sense of social change” (p.153). These movements, whether they take place on a local or global scale can replenish our sense of hope and possibilities. They can help us feel connected to the struggles of others. As a child of colonization, I feel a connection with the Latinx students, teachers, and communities whose Ethnic studies program was banned by legislators. Even if we are separated by place and time, I feel I “share a journey” with the advocates of this Ethnic studies program (Shapiro, 2005, p.77). In that ban, I saw the oppressive power and the

culture of silencing that affected me as a teenager. My identity as a student of critical pedagogy pushes me to listen to the stories of those who aim to bring about justice in our world. Critical knowledge connects us to those who experience and fight oppression in all its forms. Critical pedagogy echoes Dr. King's words "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" (King, 1963, para. 4). I also feel that injustice to anyone is an injustice to everyone. Critical knowledge enables us to see that the net of oppression is cast over all those who do not fit the "white supremacist" social, cultural, political, and economic project. Critical pedagogy connects us. Compassion, solidarity, and love are foundational in the struggles for justice.

### **Conclusion**

Becoming a student of critical pedagogy helped me put my experiences in a socio-cultural and political context. This ongoing process has helped me see the then-invisible power and forces that shaped my experiences. It gave me language to identify power, how it works, who holds it, who benefits from it, and who is hurt by it. Having that language helped me challenge power when it worked against justice, against people who are the most vulnerable. Critical pedagogy helped me imagine different possibilities to make this world a better place.

hooks (1994) writes that she "came to Freire thirsty, dying of thirst (in that way that the colonized, marginalized subject who is still unsure of how to break the hold of the status quo, who longs for change, is needy, is thirsty)" (p.50). I was not thirsty when I first encountered critical pedagogy. I was angry as hell. "Despite all my rage, I felt like a rat in a cage" (Corgan, 1995), a prisoner in my own body. In my youth, without critical

questions in regard to power in society and education I could only understand my ignorance about Algeria as a sign of my own failures. Without critical language I only blamed myself. After moving to the USA, I was able to question society as an outsider. The brushing off of my questions about ROTC and other elements of schooling upset me. Coworkers refused to see what was glaring to me. I could not pretend this was “normal” and stay still. I had to do something. It started with questioning. I had to move. The anger was rising. I was becoming the wave (Stryker, 1994). Coming from a different country enabled me to see American norms. The strings of the American social world could not be invisible to me, at least, the ones that differed from the French strings. When speaking to people around me about what I saw as problematic messages and practices, they would shrug their shoulders. To them, I was an ignorant alien. Someone who did not know. I wonder if this is what Cassandra, the mythic Greek princess, felt. In her story, Cassandra was gifted with the power of prophecy and afflicted with the curse that no one would believe her. As a foreign parent, teacher, and student, I felt I could see problems in schools and beyond but everyone dismissed me.

Becoming a student of critical pedagogy has been liberating. It gave me language to understand my world and the social, cultural, and political forces I was up against. I am still angry but I am hoping that this doctoral journey, these three letters after my name will break or alleviate Cassandra’s curse, that the journey to adding them to my name will work as a hopeful path (Duncan Andrade, 2009). I hope that my rage will move me into just actions. Becoming a student of critical has become part of my identity. Freire (2009) writes that we, as human beings, are “unfinished”, always in the process of becoming



(p.84). Becoming a student of critical pedagogy is a process. It cannot end. I gain new questions and new insights about the meaning of this new identity. I continue to be a student of critical pedagogy by questioning my experiences, the world, and my position in it. I continue on this critical path by questioning my participation in systems of oppression. I continue on this path by revisiting my stories and listening to the stories of people who do not share my experiences. Through these stories I am exposed to different “different ways of seeing and knowing” (hooks, 2010, p.46). Stories that are different than our own “are a way of knowing. Therefore, they contain both power and the art of possibility. we need more stories” (hooks, 2010, p.53).

When I decided to focus on video games as a research interest, I interviewed other players. It was difficult for me to hear their stories. Difficult because they did not correspond to my experiences. I found myself pushing back. I could not step back because I felt that my experiences were not present in the literature or in my interviewees’ life. Researching other players’ experiences was working to silence my own experiences. I was not ready for these projects. In order to be a better listener, I first needed to know myself. I could not do justice to other players’ experiences if mine were not clear to me. Interrogating one’s own experiences is an essential and continuous process in becoming a student of critical pedagogy. In this chapter, I have examined and re-interpreted my schooling and education experiences through critical pedagogy. I shared how this examination has brought me healing and empowerment. In the next chapter, I detail the methodology and process I have employed to examine, interrogate, and make meaning of my video gaming experiences through critical pedagogy.

## CHAPTER III

### AUTOETHNOGRAPHY AS METHODOLOGY

#### **Introduction**

Writing was a personal quest, a way into myself, and into my culture (Goodall, 2000, p.39)

In this chapter I discuss autoethnography as a methodology. I anchor my decision to adopt an autoethnographic method in the fact that there are no first-person accounts of video gaming experiences. Researchers such as Gee (2003) or Nardi (2010) studied video games as newcomers to the video gaming sphere. Braithwaite (2015), Gray (2014), and Chen (2009) are video game players but their research did not focus on their own experiences. They conducted ethnographic projects through which they studied specific games or players other than themselves. I have not found any studies in which researchers focused on their own lived video gaming experience as a member of that community. Using autoethnography constitutes a new angle in the study of video games. This project will therefore constitute another significant step in video game studies. My study adds an original account to a much more complex whole. More stories and more accounts of video gaming experiences are needed in order to better understand the video gaming culture. This project is also a call for other scholars/players to question and analyze their lived experiences of video gaming. I start the detail of my methodology by

reviewing Ellis' approaches to autoethnographic work (2004). I then proceed with explaining the approach that fits my study and detail the methods I employed to collect and analyze my data. In the last section of this chapter, I address the criteria of evaluation for my work.

### **Ellis' Approaches to Autoethnographic Work**

The word autoethnography is composed of three terms. Auto refers to the self. Ethno refers to culture. Graphy refers to writing. The overarching definition of autoethnography refers to the writing of the self in relation to a specific cultural context. There are nuances to this definition. Reed-Danahay (1997) writes that "the word "autoethnography" has been used for at least two decades by literary critics as well as by anthropologists and sociologists and can have multiple meanings" (p.4). Ellis (2004) identifies six approaches to autoethnographic work. I briefly review them here, and then focus on the approaches I have adopted for this study.

The first approach is personal narrative. Ellis (2004) describes it as an approach through which researchers "view themselves as the phenomenon" (p.45). They write "evocative stories specifically focused on their academic as well as their personal lives" (p.45). Researchers write about "topics that matter and may make a difference" (p.46).

The second approach is indigenous or native autoethnography. Here, researchers write from the positionality of colonial object or economic subordinate. Hayano (1979) made this approach to autoethnography by emphasizing the importance of studying one's own people, the idea of natives as ethnographers. This contrasted with the histories of ethnographic and anthropological work which are tied to colonialism. Indeed, the early

focus of ethnographic work was the study of the other (Hayano, 1979; Reed-Danahay, 1997; Anderson, 2006). In other words, ethnography has its roots in the colonial history of Europeans studying peoples they colonized. The concept of “going native” coined by Malinowski (1922) translated the idea that researchers would adopt the ways of their research subjects. That term shows that there was a clear separation between those doing the studying and those being studied. Through this epistemology the perspectives and understandings of the natives were, at best, absent in this research model.

Hayano describes that over time Western colonizers invaded many spaces of our planet. Fewer and fewer peoples were left untouched by the hunger of the colons. While regulated by colonizers, frontiers and barriers became porous. As colonizers penetrated the lands of indigenous peoples, indigenous people entered the colonizers’ societies. With time and struggle for justice, the colonized made their way into academia and some became anthropologists (Fahim, 1977). These newly trained scholars wanted to do ethnographic work among their own people. Indigenous or native autoethnography was a way for natives to reclaim ownership of their culture and provide a perspective that was absent from scholarship.

The third approach is reflexive or narrative ethnography. Through this approach, authors work through their own stories within a specific culture or subculture. They aim to shed light on these cultures through these accounts. Ellis (2004) writes that reflexive ethnographies “exist along a continuum” (p.46). They range from “starting research from one’s own biography” (p.47) to studying one’s life along with other community members’ life, to confessional tales where the researcher’s struggles in that study take

center stage. In reflexive ethnography, “researchers incorporate their personal experience and standpoint (...) by starting with a story about themselves, explaining their personal connection to the project, or using personal knowledge to help them in the research project” (p.48).

The fourth approach is that of complete member researchers. This approach focuses on the researcher converting to the culture or group they study. They go through the process of becoming a member and study their “conversion” experience.

The fifth approach is ethnographic memoir. This approach refers to the personal tale of what took place ‘backstage’ during a research project. This approach is also known as confessional tale or “confessional ethnography” (Van Maanen, 1995, p.8). However, Ellis denotes that the latter term is problematic because it is connoted with sin, the idea of having done something wrong, and “telling them to someone more powerful than we are” (p.50). Ethnographic memoirs used to be published separately from what was considered the body of the study. The reflections, experiences, and questions associated with research were seen as potentially detrimental to the original project. Ethnographic memoirs used to be seen as taints to the research project.

The sixth approach is contingent autoethnography. Here, the author’s plans consisted in studying others. In the process of doing so, the researcher comes to understand themselves in a new way. This experience compels the author to write about it in addition to or instead of their original project.

Despite these nuances, all autoethnographic approaches share a common aspect. They revolve around the writing of culture through the assumed lens of the researcher as

well as the relationship between the writer and the culture they are immersed in. Rather than hiding their perspective behind the mirage of the neutral observer, autoethnographers assume their presence in their research in order to hold themselves accountable for it (Richardson, 2000). The stories autoethnographers render through their lived experiences help readers better understand their own experience and the world we share.

### **Studying my Video Gaming Experiences Through Reflexive Personal Narrative**

For this study I have adopted an autoethnographic approach that combines personal narrative and reflexive ethnography. My research fits the personal narrative approach since I will focus on an aspect of my personal life through which I am entering the academic field: video gaming. Moreover, I included “sensory and emotional experience” (Ellis, 2004, p.46) which is an important aspect of writing a personal narrative. I have also used elements of reflexive autoethnography as I focused on a specific subculture that has become a cultural phenomenon: the video gaming culture. In that process, I use my own stories and analyze them in a larger socio-cultural context to open myself up to new understandings. Autoethnographers identify this essential process as reflexivity. They describe it through different images such as “bending back” (Ellis, 2004, p.37), “looking inward and outward” (Ellis, 2004, p.37)”, or “look[ing] in (at themselves) and out (at the world)” (Boylorn, 2008, p.413). These images define reflexivity as the capacity to question one’s experiences and translate a process through which personal stories are reflected through and upon in order to validate them. The process of reflexivity allows writers to draw meanings that go beyond personal accounts

and towards an understanding of culture and of our world. Because an essential part of my work constitutes in crafting personal evocative stories through which I reflected on my lived experiences, my approach reads as a combination between personal narrative and reflexive ethnography. In the next section, I detail the methods and processes of my autoethnographic research: collecting data, analyzing it, and presenting it.

### **Doing Autoethnography: Methods and Processes in Data Collection, Analysis, and Presentation**

There is a wide variety of methods in terms of conducting autoethnographic work. Some autoethnographers have crafted epiphanies to recollect and make sense of childhood experiences (Boylorn, 2013; Rambo Ronai, 1995) or in order to make sense of a single event (Richardson, 2013). Other projects have relied on prolonged periods of observation (Goodall, 1994; Geertz, 2005). Others have combined the crafting of epiphanies in addition to a period of investigation and interviewing (Poulos, 2009). Chang (2007) writes that “Autoethnographers are commended to develop their own techniques of data collection to meet their research goals” (p.210). To study my video gaming experiences, I have used two sets of data. The first set consists of written memories of my video gaming experience. These range from my earliest video gaming moments to recent games I have played. I have crafted this set of data as epiphanies through Richardson’s (2003) concept of writing as a form of inquiry (p.499). I call this set of data my memory set.

The second set consists of an observation of my current video gaming experience: my observation set. I needed this latter set because as a thirty-year member of the culture I am studying there were many aspects of my experiences that I took for granted. There

were many aspects of what I do when I play that had become invisible. Some of these choices and decisions became mechanical. They constituted the ‘normal’ way I play, I am, I see in that community. To bring these then-invisible facets of my experience to light, I adopted in this second set a more traditional aspect of data collection through the use of a journal and diary. I detail in the next sections the methods and techniques I employed to collect each set of data. After having done so, I go over the process I used to analyze that data.

### **My Memory Set: Crafting Video Gaming Epiphanies Through Writing as a Form of Inquiry**

I write because I want to find something out (Richardson, 2003, p.501)

I, like Richardson (2003), have been taught that I was “not to write until I knew what I wanted to say, until my points were organized and outlined” (p.501). Writing was for me and many others a tool to use only when my plan had been set and established. Writing was taught to me as one of the final steps in the writing process, a step that came after the outline, the backbone of my thoughts and thinking process was cemented. Writing then became an activity induced with fear and finality. If I did not have a clear idea of what I wanted to write and how I was going to get there I would not allow myself to write sentences. This particular idea of writing prevented me from writing freely. It prevented me from seeing myself as a writer. It prevented me from seeing writing and language as a way to inquire, investigate, as a way to make sense of myself, of my experiences, and of my world. I was taught that the writing process starts with thinking



and organizing ideas as opposed to toying with language and exploring through words, rhymes, metaphors, and other meaning making crafts.

Richardson (2003) writes that language is the centerpiece of writing. She states that “language does not “reflect” social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality” (p.508). She adds that language is a tool that helps construct “the individual’s subjectivity in ways that are historically and locally specific” (p.508). Language and therefore writing are tools we use and experiment with to bring our world into existence, what Rose describes as to “word the world” (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2003, p.500). Writing, one of the ways we use language, is more than the mechanical act of inking letters down or pressing keys. Writing is a process through which we make sense of our experiences, our world, and our position in it by bringing ideas to life on paper. Writers/researchers bring experiences to consciousness through articulating thoughts and feelings. Writing is a series of trials and attempts at making sense of our experiences.

Autoethnography is partial and incomplete. Writing as a form of inquiry allows us to make claims about the world through our experiences and to recognize that these claims represent a partial and incomplete account, not a universal Truth. It is about ““getting it” differently contoured and nuanced”; It is not about “getting it right” (Richardson, 2003, p.511). Crafting epiphanies is about finding my voice by penciling it on paper, by experimenting with it until I flesh out my experiences and therefore flesh out my world. Writing as a form of inquiry is about finding our subjectivity rather than playing God. Through it, we can claim to “know “something” without claiming to know everything” (Richardson, 2003, p.508). Through the writing of my experiences, I have

shed light on the meaning I made of video gaming. I claim these stories as an important part of a much larger whole.

Richardson (2003) encourages writers to experiment with various styles and forms of writing in order to hone their skill, find and nurture their voice. She adds that through this experimentation, writers can get to new findings about their topics and relationship to them. In my first data set, I follow Richardson's advice and draw inspiration from a long line of autoethnographers who have crafted epiphanies from distant and close memories (Boylorn, 2013; Metta, 2013; Poulos, 2009; Tillman-Healy, 1996; Rambo Ronai, 1995). My epiphanies highlight and retrace over thirty years of video gaming experiences. I wrote twenty video gaming epiphanies, some of which I had already drafted for pilot studies or conference papers. These memories date back as far as the early 90's. The most recent ones are as close as 2017. I had more than twenty stories to tell about my video gaming experiences. I had to make choices in the selection of these epiphanies. My process for selecting these stories was tied to the rage I felt when reading the literature on video gaming and education and noticing the absence of a variety of players' voices in these discussions. Addressing this silence served as a guide in selecting my stories. As a student of critical pedagogy, the stories I chose were tied to critical themes I explored in my literature review, such as community, identity, hegemony, social world, praxis, meaning, and oppression.

I have experimented with various forms of writing in crafting my epiphanies. These forms include first person narratives, a poem, a letter, dialogues, internal dialogues, and an ABC story. I have used pictures, screenshots, French language,

passages from an actual email, quotes, two piano partitions, and other tools to tell my stories. My epiphanies were between two and eight pages long. These twenty epiphanies crafted through the writing as inquiry method constitute my first data set, my memory set. While selected fragments of these epiphanies are used in my findings chapters, I include all of them in their entirety as index items (Appendix A).

### **My Observation Set**

To structure the observation of my video gaming experience, I asked myself questions in regard to the overall length of the observation period, the length of my play sessions, and the scope of what constitutes my video gaming experiences. I address each of these points by relying on qualitative research that focuses on video gaming worlds. After having addressed these points, I share the methods I have employed to collect data for my observation set, namely journaling and field notes. I also explain the purpose and rationale behind the use of these two tools.

#### **The question of time: length of observation period and playing session**

**length.** To determine the length of time of my observation, I drew on the work of Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2010). They created a guide for the study of virtual worlds and video games. While their guide is helpful for my study, their recommendations focus on ethnographic work, the observation of players other than the researcher. Some of their guidelines and vocabulary such as ‘interviewing’ or ‘participant observer’ do not apply to my study. Therefore, I selected recommendations that can be helpful to my study and adapted others.

Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2010) explain that three factors considerably reduce the length of the observation period. They list that having conducted preliminary fieldwork, being familiar with the language (which I interpret here as being familiar with the culture), or returning to a well-known field site can impact the overall length of the study. They argue that “if an ethnographer has already engaged in research, follow up studies of one to three months may be possible if the research question is sufficiently focused” (p.89). In addition to being familiar with the culture and site of research, I have already conducted two pilot researches in this field through classwork. I have also presented six papers at national conferences on my research and experiences in video gaming (Kout, 2016a; Kout, 2016b, Kout, 2017a; Kout, 2017b; Kout, 2018a; Kout, 2018b). Moreover, my being a member of the video gaming community for over 30 years gives me familiarity with the culture I have studied. For these reasons, I have chosen a time frame of two months for the observation phase of my study.

In regard to length of play session, Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, and Taylor (2010) state that “the times we choose to log in should reflect the patterns of our participants” (p.89). I interpret their statement as the need to adapt observations to the play schedule of participants. In the case of my study, this means that I did not modify my play schedule for the purpose of this study. I adapted my observation to my current play schedule rather than modify my play schedule to fit a generic or arbitrary observation frame. As it stands, I usually played between five and seven days a week. On these days, I played between one and three hours, rarely in a continuous manner. My observation consisted of collecting data within that schedule.

**Scope of the field.** Projects on the study of video games historically revolved around studying one game or players within a single game (Bartle, 1996; Chen, 2009; Nardi, 2010). However, video gaming is not an isolated island. Like any other space, video gaming is a socially constructed space (Schwalbe, 2007). Their experiences are linked to their lives outside the game (Dale, 2014). Golub (2010) writes that to fully grasp the reach and power of games such as World of Warcraft we must study online games not as an isolated space but as an integrant part of players' lives:

By expanding my scope to include the technical and cultural systems which ramify out of in-game activities, I hope to have at least suggested an analysis of raider culture as one of proliferating, overlapping domains of experience: although boss fights can only occur in World of Warcraft, this is a world that is curiously laminated. (p.42)

Golub shatters the cliché of online and offline lives as secluded worlds by demonstrating that the offline and online spaces are intertwined: they inform and influence each other. Video gaming does not exist in a vacuum. Dichotomies and binaries such as offline/online or real/virtual represented by terms such as '*in real-life*' (IRL) or virtual worlds are "*imperfect and misleading*" (Dengah, Fagan, Lacy & Snodgrass, 2011, p.1211). The experiences of players must be studied as integrant part of the player's lives. Taylor (2009) further illustrates the need to study video games beyond the screen by stating that:

Games, and their play, are constituted by the interrelations between (to name just a few) technological systems and software (including the imagined player embedded in them), the material world (including our bodies at the keyboard), the online space of the game (if any), game genre, and its histories, the social worlds that infuse the game and situate us outside of it, the emergent practices of

communities, our interior lives, personal histories, and aesthetic experience, institutional structures that shape the game and our activity as players, legal structures, and indeed the broader culture around us with its conceptual frames and tropes. (p.332)

In my study, the scope of the field reaches beyond the pixels on the screen. It includes a broad range of experiences such as out of game experiences with friends I have made in game and discussions with my son in regard to the games he plays, or we play.

**Data collection.** In order to capture my video gaming experience, I developed my own techniques of data collection by drawing and expanding on Goodall's (2000) recommendations. Goodall (2000) used two journals to conduct what he coined "new ethnography" (p.9): a set of field notes and a diary. The purpose of the field notes is to collect information about those he observed. In my study, I dedicated the set of field notes to collect data about my actions in and around my video gaming experience. I used my field notes to keep track of my playing time by recording start and end times. I recorded the title of the games I play. I described the actions I took in game and what I accomplished. I also recorded actions and events tied to video gaming experiences that occurred outside of screen time. For example, I kept track of video gaming ads I saw when surfing the web or discussions I had with acquaintances about the video games we play.

One of my purposes in writing field notes was to address a potential pitfall of doing research in my own "backyard" (Glesne, 2011, p.41). Glesne describes "backyard" research as conducting projects in an environment the researcher is familiar with. One of

the risks of doing work in such an environment is that many aspects of that culture may have become “natural” or “invisible” to the researcher. Therefore, I may have not perceived some of my actions as meaningful because they became mechanical and normalized. Using field notes to keep track of these actions became an important tool in helping me make my familiar strange, visible, and noticeable. I kept my field notes in notebooks I carried with me wherever I went during these two months. The notebooks were small enough to slide in my back pocket.

The second tool Goodall (2000) recommends in conducting observations is the use of a diary. The purpose of this diary is to record feelings, thoughts, reflections, and questions that may occur during the observation. I used a google doc to write up this facet of my research. Here too, I recorded dates. Initially, I had envisioned writing after every playing session. However, it became more convenient and efficient for me to dedicate a minimum of fifteen minutes per day to record my feelings, thoughts, reflections, and questions. In order to respect my dedication to not altering my play patterns, there were a few evenings when I was too exhausted to fully journal, I could barely stay up to play. On these few days, I jotted down bullet points and expanded on them the next day.

Field notes and diary constituted the two pieces I used to collect data for the observation phase of my study. With my memory set, these documents constituted my data for this project. In the next section, I explain how I analyzed this data. I detail the process of coding the data, grouping these codes in themes, and presenting these themes in a meaningful way. I relied on the work of Saldaña (2009) to describe what I did and why I did it (p.31).

## **Analyzing Data: Making Meaning Out of Memories and Observation**

The amount of data in any research project is considerable. After gathering it, researchers need to make sense of it. There are different approaches to analyzing data. Hsieh and Shannon (2005) list three such approaches: conventional content analysis, directed content analysis, and summative content analysis (p.1278). The approach that fits my study is the conventional content analysis since it is the only approach through which codes are derived from the data itself instead of being derived from theory or the literature review (p.1286). In my content analysis, I drew on two major processes to make sense of my data: coding and patterning. I explain these processes in my next section.

**Coding.** Coding data is the first step in helping researchers “summarize, condense, or reduce data” (Saldaña, 2009, p.4). Coding consists in reading data and assigning a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language based or visual data” (Saldaña, 2009. p.3).

While Hsieh and Shannon (2005) write about coding as occurring during data analysis (p.1286), Saldaña (2009) advises researchers to start coding as they collect data and not after all the fieldwork is completed (p.17). This is supported by Miles and Huberman (1984) who wrote that “late coding enfeebls the analysis. Coding is not just something one does to “get the data ready” for analysis, but something that drives ongoing data collection” (p.63). This ongoing coding is not final but creates a space for “analytic consideration while the study progresses” (Saldaña, 2009, p.17). Saldaña



recommends the use of three columns in coding (table 2). The first column is for the raw data, the second column for the preliminary code, and the third column for the final code.

Table 2. Coding Data Template

Column 1	Column 2	Column 3
Raw data	Preliminary code	Final code
The closer I get to retirement age, the faster I want it to happen. I'm not even 55 yet and I would give anything to retire now. But there's a mortgage to pay off and still a lot more to sock away in savings before I can even think of it. I keep playing the lottery, though, in hopes of winning those millions. No luck yet.	"Retirement age"  Financial obligations  Dreams of early retirement	Retirement anxiety

Note: Adapted from *The Coding manual for qualitative researchers*, by Saldaña, 2009.

As implied by the use of columns, coding is more complex than reading a set of data once and adding a code to capture a pertinent point. There is more to it than highlighting an important point and moving on. Coding cannot be finalized in one reading. It is a cyclical action (Glesne, 2011; Saldaña, 2009). It must include at least one revision process (Saldaña, 2009, p.10). Codes also send researchers back to the data and with each reading they introduce more nuances and complexities. I used this three-column method in coding my data to reflect this cyclical process.

***On ongoing analysis in autoethnographic work.*** The recommendations from Saldaña, Miles, and Huberman are made in the context of ethnographic work. They focus on ongoing coding as the source of the ongoing analysis. In this autoethnographic study,

daily journaling was the place for me to reflect on my ongoing work. This daily documentation acted as an analysis tool. I made sense of my experiences for that day. But I also reflected on the meaning and place of that day's experiences within the context of what I had field noted, journaled, and the epiphanies I had crafted since the beginning of the study. For my project, daily journaling was more than a "good device for forcing that analysis" (Miles & Huberman, 1984, p.64). It was an essential and mandatory component for forcing reflection and analysis.

**Coding concepts.** Summarizing an idea is just one of several coding concepts.

Saldaña (2009) lists the following as the main coding concepts (p.3-6):

- Descriptive coding: summarizes the primary topic of the excerpt
- Process coding: a word or phrase that captures an action
- In vivo coding: using the participants' own language
- Pattern coding: coding for patterns in the data
- Simultaneous coding: applying multiple codes to the same text

I used all of these coding concepts in my work in order to help me make sense of my data. Since I foregrounded critical pedagogy in this project, I coded my data according to principles I shared in my second chapter. These principles revolved around questions of power and meaning. They also include the ideas of community, hegemony, meaning, social world, praxis, and oppression. Data that echoed, elevated, or silenced these principles were the most important in my study.

***Coding by hand and alone.*** While several coding software such as Codebooks, CAQDAS, Atlas.ti, Maxqda, or NVivo exist, I have decided to code by hand. My stories

are personal. I am attached to them. Coding them via a software would break this intimacy. I completed this work by hand to preserve this bond.

Some researchers hire help for coding data. For example, researchers may work in teams to code together and save time in that process. I made the decision to code on my own. My decision was anchored in my will to be immersed in this experience, in my stories from beginning to end. It was also a financial decision. Hiring people to do this type of work is costly. Even if I wanted to, I could not afford this expense.

One of the challenges inherent to coding alone is the isolation. Coding alone strips away the opportunity to make meaning out of the data through conversing with people involved in a project. Being able to verbalize questions, findings, and challenges provides an opportunity to clarify thoughts and make new insights (Saldaña, 2009, p.28). To address this drawback, Saldaña recommends speaking with a colleague or mentor about our research throughout the coding process. I followed this advice. I had built in several avenues to speak about my research. I had joined two graduate writing groups that met on Friday afternoons and Saturday mornings. In these groups, I had the opportunity to share what I was working on and what I was struggling with. Moreover, I also had the opportunity to sit with Dr. Villaverde, my dissertation chair, and voice my progress as well as my challenges. A few months before the end of my project, the writing groups stopped meeting regularly. I contacted one of my friends, Chuck, who was working on a dissertation of his own in another field. We supported each other by sharing our progress and questions. This helped counter balance the end of the writing groups. These opportunities helped me address the challenges of coding in isolation.

**Analyzing data through patterning: from codes to categories.** I organized my codes in themes. This process facilitated the analysis of their connections (Saldaña, 2009, p.8). Organizing codes into themes is not merely about grouping codes that are exactly alike. Hatch (2002) lists six categories for establishing patterns (p.155):

- Similarity (things happen the same way)
- Difference (they happen in predictably different ways)
- Frequency (they happen often or seldom)
- Sequence (they appear in a certain order)
- Correspondence (they happen in relation to other activities or events)
- Causation (one appears to cause another)

Hatch's categories of patterns offered me mindful tools to make sense of codes. I used them to organize my codes and make meaning out of my data.

**Presenting findings.** Autoethnographic findings have been presented in a myriad of ways, some are controversial, but all are creative in their own ways. Rambo Ronai (1995) has weaved scholarship through her story of incest to compare and contrast her lived experiences with the current scholarship on child abuse. Matte (2013) has investigated her story of domestic abuse by anchoring it in scholarship and using powerful illustrations she designed with the assistance of an artist. Tillman-Healy (1996) presented her work on bulimia through a series of poems without any references to literature by using stories as theories to convey their meaning and experiences (Bochner, 1997). The latter presentation style usually receives a lot of pushback for a multitude of reasons. One of them is the idea that new research must be anchored in existing scholarship.

For my project, I used a rather conventional presentation. I drew out major themes from my codes and used passages from journal, field notes, and epiphanies to illustrate these themes. I used theories from critical pedagogy and psychology to anchor my findings. In the end, my findings loosely resemble Rambo Ronai's work. She weaves scholarship and personal stories to present her findings. She uses that format to either reinforce, challenge, or add new perspectives on scholarship. I found that format creative and insightful. While Rambo Ronai's experiences are horrifying, her writing is captivating and drew me in. My findings are presented in the same style. My readers will be the judges of the literary quality of my work. Richardson (2003) labels this weaving as a "layered text" (p.530). She describes it as "putting yourself into your text and putting your text into the literatures and traditions of social science" (p.530).

No matter the presentation style, autoethnography as a methodology has been challenged in academia and even perceived as invalid. In the next section, I address and rebuke these perceived issues of canonical validity, especially the idea that researchers should be distant and invisible in their study. I will build on this argument to set criteria for the validity and evaluation of my autoethnographic study.

**Rebuking the mirage of the invisible researcher.** Proponents of canonical research (Atkinson, 1997; King, Keohane & Verba, 1994) have criticized autoethnography because it does not meet standards of objectivity and detachment. The argument here is that autoethnography is "biased, navel-gazing, self-absorbed, or emotionally incontinent" (Mogadime, 2010, p.45). However, other scholars have shown that research cannot be done from a "neutral, impersonal, and objective stance" (Ellis,

Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.274) many of the critics argue for. Indeed, the way we see the world is informed by the cultural lenses we have acquired (DiAngelo & Sensoy, 2017). Our perspectives are never neutral. Goodall (2000) writes that “descriptions of the outward world come from deep inside of us (p.95). Villaverde (2008) explains that “traditional paradigms separate logic and emotion and isolate social factors from the object of study” (p.106). In doing so, she argues that traditional research hides power and silences various truths to present one Truth as all-encompassing in the name of certainty and objectivity. Anyone who claims to be certain or objective is, consciously or not, portraying their lens and way of viewing the world as the norm, a norm that may be invisible to them. In academia, proponents of objectivity apply a normative lens that has dominated research standards for decades. This lens represents a “white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective” (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011, p.275). Humphreys (2004) describes proponents of objectivity and neutrality as scholars who “teach, research, publish, and often conceal their presence within third-person research accounts” (p.843). Rambo Ronai (1995) writes that “the traditional narrative form in science force-feeds the reader a particular understanding of the world masquerading as *the* understanding of the world” (p.396). Becoming objective is therefore not about reaching some elevated objective or neutral point of view as canonical researchers claim. Instead it deals with hiding the researcher’s positionality, normalizing a perspective, interpretations, and findings. Ellis and Bochner (1996) write that “instead of masking our presence, leaving it at the margins, we should make ourselves more personally accountable for our perspective” (p.15). Autoethnographers do

not mask their subjectivity as proponents of canonical research do, nor do they blindly embrace it. Autoethnographers are aware that what they research, see, write, and report is informed by their cultural lenses, by their subjectivity. By acknowledging this, they are more likely to address potential issues arising from placing themselves at the center of their study rather than normalizing their findings and passing them as objective and universal. This is all the more striking for researchers who do not fit the “white, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper classed, Christian, able-bodied” norm. Standing outside of this normalized lens makes that lens all the more visible, palpable, and painful. For such researchers, the turn to “creative analytic practices” is lived as liberating (Richardson, 2003, p.523). Autoethnography is one such creative analytic practice.

***Making myself accountable for my positionality.*** There are two major chapters that frame my video gaming story. The first is a chapter that seems typical of an immigrant child’s journey into a new world of possibilities. It is a story that blends fascination, discovery, playfulness, and sacrifice. As a child, video games enabled me to connect with other young people to make friends and to find a sense of fulfillment when defeating bosses or finishing games. It also gave me and my friends a basis on which to build a community. As teenagers, we would gather at my friends’ Daniel or Chien’s house to play, laugh, and be together. On two occasions, we organized neighborhood Street Fighter 2 tournaments. This was e-sports in the making.

My background as the child of struggling immigrants also influenced this first chapter of my video gaming story. My parents’ sacrifice to purchase a computer was a financial possibility for them. However large that sacrifice was, however long they had to

save to make it happen, they were in a position where they could make it happen. By this I mean that some families might have never been able to save that much money or save any money. I was privileged in the sense that my parents valued my desire and could make that desire a reality through financial literacy.

The second chapter of my video gaming story took place in my mid-twenties after I moved to the United States and, ironically enough, became an immigrant. This new chapter is best represented by my sister's reaction when I told her that I was writing my dissertation about my video gaming experiences. "Why not role playing games?" she replied. My most visible passion before moving to the United States was pen and paper role playing games. As a thirteen year old, every Saturday afternoon, I would gather with my friends around a table, dice, character sheets, and snacks to fulfill heroic prophecies and defeat evil wizards entrenched in their dark towers. Over the years, our characters and scenarios became more complex. My friends and I played human street samurais and cybernetic orc shamans hired by oligarchist corporations and dragons to do their bidding across a futuristic techno-magical world. In high school, Saturday afternoons turned into Saturday nights. We then took on the roles of gothic-punk vampires trying to find our place in a London ruled by creatures of the night. The weekdays between our gaming sessions were filled with plotting our next moves and discussing the political ramifications of our decisions on the geopolitical vampire map of London. One summer, I visited London with Benoît, my friend and Vampire storyteller. We stopped by St Paul's Cathedral. Benoît could not help himself and pointed out with a hellish smile that this was the location where I had lost my beloved vampire character, Mike Powell. This



threw me back to that dreaded Saturday night. I had uncovered who the grey eminence of the main story was. This ancient and obscure vampire had made St Paul's his haven. Unfortunately, he noticed me as I was conducting a reconnaissance mission. I remember running to the upper level thinking I could use one of my powers to sink through the floor and escape through the main entrance (it was highly unlikely the grey eminence had that power and could follow me). Once upstairs, I told Benoît I was using my sinking power called "earth meld." He replied that this power only worked to sink in the soil of the earth, not building floors. I froze. I had done this before. He had let me do this before. Why change the rules now? Asking him that question would make me look like I was begging or even worse, cheating. There was nothing I could do if he did not remember. Benoît described the following scene. The grey eminence grabbed Mike and sunk its fangs in his jugular draining the life out of him and turning my love for my music composing vampire character into ashes of melancholy and nostalgia... I forgive you Ben. I forgive you.

In these days, video gaming did have a place in my life, but it was less pronounced than it is today. Role playing games were probably more visible to my sister and family members. I had to leave for many hours to play. Moreover, the fact that none of the friends I played role playing games with were Arabic must have stood out to my sister. My relationship with video gaming did exist in these early years, it was less obvious and less important than it is now.

I lost my role playing game identity when I moved to the United States. The characters. The stories. The Saturday nights. The Saturday evenings. The weekdays in

between. The childhood friends. The hole was considerable. I had not anticipated the hurt this would cause me. I spent years looking for role playing groups after coming to North Carolina. I did find a few groups but their role playing habits were not the ones I valued. They were all too worried about the number of dice they were rolling and how high the resulting score was. In my group, we never let a dice roll get in the way of a good story. These new groups did not work for me. Confronted with a growing sense of isolation and loneliness, I overcame the stigma around dressing up and tried Live Action Role Playing (LARP), an activity I had never dared venturing into while in France. While the depth of the scenarios and political intrigues were captivating and reminiscent of my experience in France, I realized that this sixty people group worked in cliques, cliques I was not part of and never would be. One night, I overheard a specific clique speaking about World of Warcraft. I knew of the game. My computer was not powerful enough to run it and paying that monthly \$15 subscription fee had been a deterrent. However, in the name of forging bonds I decided to buy the game and try to make friends with them. As we say in French “la mayonnaise n’a pas pris,” literally, the mayonnaise did not take. Despite my efforts at fitting in (I even served as one of the storytellers for that LARP group), I did not find what I was looking for. I was not able to make friends with any of them through the LARP or through WoW. After about two years, I left the LARP but stayed in WoW. There, I joined a guild and started playing with other people. I thought that maybe, in WoW, I could find the community, friendships, camaraderie, and sense of wonder I had lost and had been longing for. For the first time in many years, I felt hopeful.

I had played video games in the seven years between my move to the USA and my finding WoW. Some of these games had online components but did not include community building elements. Through guilds, WoW gives players a platform to take on challenges that, by design, cannot be overcome alone. WoW deepened and enriched my connection with video games in many ways. It gave me the possibility to regain what I had lost.

*My identities in the video gaming community.* Even if I am member of the video gaming community, I do not fit the “dominant white, heterosexual, male, teen gamer image” (Shaw, 2012, p.29). My identities as an immigrant, son of immigrant, French citizen, non-Muslim Arab, father, critical pedagogue, educator, teacher, and husband, to name a few, set me apart from the perceived normative identities of the stereotypical video game player. On the other hand, my identities as a heterosexual cisgender man and able-bodied person fit the normative identities of the stereotype. The identities that set me apart put me in a position where I am most likely to experience, feel, and see difference and dynamics tied to the dominant identities of the video gaming culture. However, the identities that place me in the dominant group play a role in blinding me to matters of gender, sexuality, and ability. When it comes to sexism, heterosexism, and ableism, being a member of the dominant groups puts me in a position where I have the “most narrow or limited view of society” (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p.64). For example, as a man, I am much less likely to notice sexism than a woman and will never experience it. To account for this potential pitfall, I was mindful of my dominant identities in my findings, theming, and coding to the best of my abilities. I held myself accountable to these identities by

looking for the absences of these facets of oppression in my findings, coding, and theming. My intent in doing so was bifold. First, I wanted to bring more complexity to my analysis. Second, as a student of critical pedagogy, I wanted to interrogate the ways in which my experiences might perpetuate sexism, heterosexism, and ableism so that I could reflect on and propose alternatives in order to stop or minimize my participation in these oppressive systems.

Most video games, especially commercial ones, are designed for people of my gender. Revisiting my findings, themes, and codes through the lenses of sexism, heterosexism, and ableism is a method I employed to help me account for my gender, sexuality, and ability. I asked myself the following questions as I revised my work. These questions were:

1. How did my gender, sexuality, and ability inform this finding, theme, or code?
2. Where in my work are my gender, sexuality, and ability present?

These questions were not an afterthought or an artificial last step. I intended to account for gender, sexuality, and ability throughout all of my work, but knowing that these facets of oppression might be invisible to me, I added an additional layer of accountability. As a student of critical pedagogy, I understand that these questions went against my socialization, therefore they were all the more important. This was a difficult process. It was not foolproof. However, it was an important step in accounting for my positionality in dominant groups.

***My privilege in video gaming.*** My playing video games was and is made possible by several privileges. Having access to video games in my childhood and today is a

financial privilege. I have the finances that allow me to purchase video gaming systems (even if I only play on the PC, I could afford more), games, and sustain a monthly subscription to a game like WoW. This is a privilege not everyone holds. Computers are not present in every household. I played with people who had to quit WoW because at some point they could no longer afford the \$15 monthly subscription.

Playing video games is not a passion my wife and I share. My playing privilege, in terms of time spent in front of the computer, is also the result of a negotiation with her. Most of the video games I play require dedicated attention, some for periods of time that go beyond an hour. Being able to engage in these activities meaningfully demands that I ignore my surroundings. This is especially true when I raid in WoW for an intense 3 hours. This absence from my family while we are physically under the same roof is only possible through negotiations with my loved ones. I am thankful for the opportunity they give me to engage in an activity that I enjoy.

**Evaluating autoethnographic work.** The evaluation of autoethnographic work cannot and does not abide by the rigid and exclusive formulas of canonical research. Autoethnographic work does not function according to a set of immutable norms in a quest for certainty and Truth (Villaverde, 2008). Peer reviewers of qualitative work such as autoethnography use different criteria. To craft and evaluate my work, I relied on the combination of two sets of criteria. Those two evaluation sets (table 2) are those of two prominent reviewers of qualitative work: Laurel Richardson (2000) and Art Bochner (2000).

Table 3. Evaluation Criteria for Qualitative Work

Richardson's Criteria	Bochner's Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Substantive contribution: whether the piece contributes to our understanding of social life</li> <li>● Aesthetic merit: whether the author has crafted a complex aesthetic piece that invites interpretive responses</li> <li>● Reflexivity: whether the author's subjectivity has been accounted for as a producer and product of the piece</li> <li>● Impact: whether the piece moves the reader</li> <li>● Expression of a reality: whether the piece carries an embodied sense of lived-experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Abundant concrete detail: trivial routines of everyday life and flesh and blood of emotions</li> <li>● Structurally complex narratives: rotates between past and present</li> <li>● Judgment about the author's emotional credibility, vulnerability and honesty</li> <li>● Tale of two selves: a believable journey from who the author was to who the author is</li> <li>● Standard of ethical consciousness</li> <li>● A story that moves the reader</li> </ul>

Bochner and Richardson acknowledge that their lists constitute only two of many others in evaluating qualitative research. I have chosen to use their criteria because their work has been crucial to my understanding of autoethnography and the crafting of my methodology. Rather than use one or the other, I opted to delineate my own criteria based

on theirs. In their lists, I see three main themes: reflexivity, aesthetic merit, and the expression of lived experiences. Through reflexivity, I opened the possibility for my study to change me and my understanding of the medium that has been part of my life for many decades. Through aesthetic merit, I aimed to use vibrant details to evoke emotions and move my readers. Through the expression of my lived experiences, I aimed to share my memories in an honest and gripping manner. This means that I included memories, actions, and thoughts that did not depict me in the best light. These standards informed my work as I worked through this project.

### **Conclusion**

Autoethnographies of video game players/scholars are rare. In this chapter, I have drawn on the works of autoethnographers and video game ethnographers to describe my methodology. Through this reflexive personal narrative, I present my findings in two chapters. The first of my findings chapter addresses my first research question: How do I navigate the video gaming culture as a student of critical pedagogy. That chapter tells the tale of who I was and who I am becoming. This chapter's focus is on reflexivity. Thanks to the ongoing journaling and field noting, I identified a considerable gap between how I was perceiving myself as a student of critical pedagogy and I was acting as a video game player. The two identities I foregrounded in this study were at odds. Through the ongoing analysis of my data, I surfaced concerning patterns. I refer to these patterns as enchanted, unexamined patterns of play with a medium that gave me power and had power over me. I detail these problematic patterns of behaviors and how I started addressing them throughout my observation period.

In my second findings chapter, I answer my second research question: In what ways do video games lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. This chapter focuses on the expression of my lived experiences. I use the concept of dismantling the clock to make sense of the careful examination of my experiences. Through their analysis, I share four elements of video gaming that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. While each chapter works to elevate one of the evaluation criteria, I did use each of the three criteria in evaluating my findings.



## CHAPTER IV

### BREAKING DOWN THE ENCHANTMENT: DECONSTRUCTING A CHILDHOOD PASSION

#### **Introduction**

As a student of critical pedagogy, I strive to identify my assumptions, interrogate the surface messages I grew up with, and unpack my experiences to ensure that my actions are socially just. In chapter 2, I used the literature on critical pedagogy to question my experiences as a student and educator. I showed how gaining literacy in critical pedagogy helped me reframe important events of my life in a liberating way. I moved from a naïve consciousness to a critical consciousness (Freire, 2009). Through this process I saw my responsibility to act and do my part to bring this world closer to a just one. As an educator, classrooms and schools were the first spaces in which I worked to implement and nurture principles of critical pedagogy. In this chapter, I question my experiences in another area of my life, one that has played a role in my education and socialization: video gaming. As a member of the video gaming community and someone who now has critical language and knowledge to question that culture and my position in it, I wanted to know how I navigated this culture. As a student of critical pedagogy, I wanted to better understand my experiences with oppressive forces and look for new ways to implement critical pedagogy in my video gaming. I built this chapter on two interlocked concepts. The first is the concept of enchantment. It corresponds to exposing the naïve and unexamined aspect of video gaming in my life. The second is the concept

of dismantling the clock. It corresponds to the critical analysis of the then-naïve and then-unexamined aspect of my video gaming. Dismantling the clock consists in breaking down the enchantment into critical parts or cogwheels, both work to foster consent to oppressive forces and work toward resistance. I detail these two concepts and then explain how I use them as a rationale to organize this chapter.

### **The Concept of Enchantment**

My roles as a teacher and immigrant advocate in and out of schools made it easier for me to implement and embody critical principles in schools and other institutional settings. While school is important to me, it does not have the same place as video gaming in my life. Video gaming gave me experiences that helped me question the world and make sense of my life. I found power and meaning in video gaming that helped me forge my identity in a way that schools, especially K12, did not. Therefore, this study brings in an additional layer of complexity to the study of critical pedagogy in my life. However, while video gaming gave me the power to question, it also had power over me, power that remained unexamined and therefore problematic until this study. It is this relationship of power that I coin enchantment:

- The power it gave me to build myself.
- The power it had over me in terms of my consent to problematic forces of the video gaming culture as well as its power in making me overlook, minimize, or ignore that consent.

The term enchantment has a history in academia (Saler, 2012), but it is always described as an external layer on people's understanding of the world. In other words, these

definitions speak to the power of the enchantment on one's understanding of the world, but they do not acknowledge or recognize the power it gives to enchanted people. Enchantment without an acknowledgment of the critical aspect of identity formation is therefore painted as a nefarious spell clouding and distorting judgment.

*"I hate that champion. He fights like a whore!" types one of the players just dispatched by the assassin.*

(...)

*Unfortunately, I wrote this story because I am the one who used the sexist and misogynistic slur. I am the one who was dumbfounded, incapable of explaining the words I was using. I had read them online. They made no sense to me. And somehow, in the heat of defeat, I typed them. I am not sure why I succumbed to using that language. Maybe I thought that doing so would make me a full member of the DOTA community. Maybe I thought this was just a new saying players were using and that I somehow had to conform. No matter what, I ended up using them without understanding them. Excerpt from the DOTA epiphany.*

An analysis of this story that limits enchantment to a nefarious spell would prescribe that I leave altogether a culture that normalizes sexism in my understanding of the world. Defining enchantment in such a narrow way fails to account for the identity building I found in video gaming such as through my ActRaiser story.

### **The Concept of Dismantling the Clock**

Removing myself from this space is more complex than dispelling a nefarious spell and thereby restoring my understanding and views of the world to some original pristine understanding. The critical aspect of enchantment I stress in this study is not an alien layer we can get rid of. Enchantment is a process that becomes part of us. It imbues us. It does have power over us in that it shapes how we understand the world. It also

grants us the means through which we can construct our identity and build ourselves.

This is not a foreign layer added to our thinking. There is no dispelling it and going back to some original or before state. There is no washing off this supposedly dirty layer on our thinking and coming out clean. Therefore, the examination of our enchantment is not a process of elimination.

In this movement from naïveté to critical pedagogy individuals grasp the social, political, economic, and cultural contradictions that subvert learning. Teachers and students with a critical consciousness conceptually pull back from their lived reality so as to gain a new vantage point on who they are and how they came to be this way. With these insights in mind, they return to the complex processes of living critically and engaging the world in the ways such a consciousness requires. (Kincheloe, 2008, p.73).

Video gaming used to represent a naïve aspect of my life. I had never examined or questioned my experiences with it. While I knew there were issues within that culture, I somehow thought that the positive outweighed the negative. My thinking was superficial and therefore problematic. In this study, I went beyond this simplistic good/bad binary, what Kincheloe (2008) described as avoiding “reductionism” (p.37). I explored the depths and complexities of video gaming. I engaged in a process that consisted in taking an enchanted part of my life and putting it through a thorough and sustained analysis for several purposes. I wanted to understand how I engaged with it and how it operated in my life. I wanted to explore new ways in which critical pedagogy could be implemented in video gaming spaces. I also wanted to show the necessity for other students of critical pedagogy to examine their own forms of enchantment. I took something that I saw as

magical in my life and treated it as something mechanical in order to identify the multitudes of components that constitute it. I use the concept of dismantling the clock to refer to this critical process. I liken my work to that of the clockmaker who opens a clock to study its different parts and mechanisms. The clockmaker carefully identifies and examines each cogwheel to understand their role, how they work together, and how they enable the whole to function as a single unit. The process of dismantling a clock relates to this study in that I opened my experiences up to examination. I wrote my experiences down, materialized them on paper, and analyzed them through critical principles. This process allowed me to make the enchantment tangible. I broke it down in two main sets of cogwheels. The first set helped me better understand how I have used the power of enchantment in my life. The second set of cogwheels helped me better understand how the enchantment worked on me. This process of dismantling the clock triggered a process of self-actualization. Indeed, the latter aspect of enchantment, the questioning of how I have consented to oppressive forces and overlooked, minimized, and ignored that consent, showed me that the person I built did not correspond to the person I thought I was. This dismantling involved the troubling of a foundational part of my being because I was able for the first time in my life to place the globality and complexity of my experiences in broader social, political, cultural, and philosophical contexts. The dismantling of the clock required that I question and rebuild myself to account for the contexts I had overlooked, minimized, or ignored. This was a difficult and strenuous process, as it should be.

That said, the enchantment is not something we need to be wary about, avoid, or fight off as if we could ward off any degree of enchantment. Being enchanted is an essential part of our growth as human beings even with all the problems it carries. The enchantment testifies to our “quintessential human need to make or finding meaning” (Shapiro, 2006, p.7) and to develop our own identity. While the enchantment inherently bears problematic elements due to its naïve and unexamined nature, it also affords essential critical elements such as identity formation or belonging in that it connects us to other people who share the same enchantment. While video gaming was a powerful form of enchantment in my life, the enchantment is not limited to video games. I argue that any form of naïve and unexamined storytelling we build ourselves through is likely to carry forms of consent to oppressive forces. This is especially true for stories we are exposed to during our youth when we are most likely to be “unprotected by intellectual armor” (Christensen, 1991, p.4). Disney is a powerful example of childhood enchantment and how difficult it is for some adults to see past the stories of their youth (Sandlin & Garlen, 2016). But the enchantment can take less obvious forms of storytelling. Unexamined and naïve stories such as Thanksgiving or the idea that statues of the confederacy stand as proud testimonies of Southern heritage show how the stories that make up the enchantment are more than a foreign layer added to one’s view of the world. Dismantling these stories involves the questioning of one’s own identity, family, communities, and place in the world. Therefore, while my project deals with examining my video gaming experiences, the range and meaning of questioning the enchantment reaches further than the pixels on my screen and further than the video gaming culture. This study connects to

an exploration of culture and community in which “our identities are anything but permanent and immutable” (Shapiro, 2006, p.169). We are indeed always in the “process of becoming” (Freire, 2009, p.84). It is in this unfinishedness and in our ongoing education that we realize our humanity.

### **Rationale for Chapter Structure**

As I drafted the outline of this project, I had initially foreseen my study as a snapshot of my video gaming experiences: a frozen image of the ways in which I consented to and resisted problematic messages in the video gaming culture. The first part of my findings would list the few ways in which I consented and participated in an oppressive culture, the second one would show how I resisted oppressive messages of the video gaming culture. Somehow, I had envisioned that my resistance would outweigh my consent. However, many questions and movements were triggered over the course of my study. A synergy between autoethnography, critical pedagogy, and qualitative research took shape. Wording my experiences in different formats and analyzing these experiences in the contexts of that day and of my history with video gaming triggered reflections and a troubling. The ongoing analysis advised by Saldaña (2009), Miles, and Huberman (1984) moved me into meaning making through my two months observation period. As I wrote my epiphanies, documented my play, and recorded my feelings and thoughts, I noticed problematic patterns in my experiences especially in the ways I understood my resistance. Surfacing these patterns made me question my play and how I existed in the video gaming community. These patterns were problematic because they did not translate a critical consciousness. They showed a gap between the two identities at the core of this

project. Through the wording of my experiences, I identified a chasm between my identities as a video game player and student of critical pedagogy. My understanding of my own experiences was troubled as I collected my data. The concepts of writing as a form of inquiry (Richardson, 2003), ongoing analysis of qualitative data (Saldaña, 2009), and “self-actualization” (hooks, 1994, p.14) synergized. One led to another, informed the other, and opened the way for a tale of two selves: the journey of reconciling two identities at odds. As a result of this troubling, I chose a different organization for my findings, one that is grounded in principles of resistance and consent but also accounts for change and becoming, a shifting space which was opened by this study and through which I propose ways of resisting oppressive forces in the video gaming culture. I moved away from my envisioned presentation of the frozen consent/resistance binary which could not do justice to the criticality of this project. Instead, I have opted for an organization that represents dynamism, complexity, and troubling rather than stillness. I organized this chapter into three metathemes.



Table 4. Organization of the Chapter into Metathemes and Subthemes

<b>1. Chasm between identities: how the enchantment enabled oppressive forms of play</b>	<b>2. Enchanted resistance</b>	<b>3. Addressing the enchantment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The thinking/entertainment dichotomy</li> <li>• Consenting to neoliberal forms of play</li> <li>• The gap of captology</li> <li>• Alien in my own world</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Still born actions</li> <li>• Non-actions</li> <li>• The blind support of others' social justice work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bridging the identity gap: the gadfly               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Making sense of the gadfly</li> <li>○ The praxis of stinging: learning to arouse, persuade, and reproach</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Under Chasm between identities: how the enchantment enabled oppressive forms of play, I list the problematic gaps between the two identities I placed at the core of this project: my video gaming identity and my student of critical pedagogy identity. I identified four themes that show a dissonance between the two. In the thinking/entertainment dichotomy, I show how I segregated my critical analysis of video gaming to a subset of games that tackle social issues. However, I seldom engaged in the critical analysis of the games I played for fun. There were games I played to critique and others were games I played to have fun. This dichotomy set the tone for my consent in the games I played to have fun with. In consenting to neoliberal forms of play, I show that I engaged in forms of play that devalue the humanity of people I played with. I engaged in individualistic forms of play and valued numbers over people. In the gap of captology, I write about the influence of capitalism on video gaming through captology

(Fogg, 1999), the study of computers as persuasive technologies. The intersection of captology and capitalism works to create game mechanisms that trap players in. The goal is to make them spend time and money in these games. Whereas I was aware of captology before this study, I still fell for many of these mechanisms. In an alien in my own world, I write about how learning about racism and white supremacy in video gaming pushed me to silence myself in the games I played and with the people I played . As a student of critical pedagogy, I spoke out and acted against these forces in schools and other institutions. However, I felt paralyzed and powerless in video gaming.

Under enchanted resistance, I detail a form of resistance in which I engaged before and early in my observation period. I labelled this form of resistance “enchanted” because it corresponds to a form of resistance which was naïve, not examined. This resistance was not anchored in a critical analysis of my own actions. These were surface acts of resistance which I believed to be in line with critical pedagogy. This enchanted resistance contributed to the enchantment by leading me to think I was acting critically when I was not. Satisfied, I never considered examining this enchanted resistance or find additional ways to resist. In still born actions, I regroup actions I initiated but never followed through with. I envisioned critical actions but stopped at the first barrier. In non-actions, I write about acts I had perceived as meaningful and aligned with critical pedagogy. However, through this study, I show that these clicks and likes required little to nothing of me. They did not constitute praxis but worked to make me feel fulfilled. In the blind support of others’ social justice work, I write about the shallowness of the

support I gave to people and organization that claimed to tackle injustice and oppression in video game space.

In the last section of this chapter, addressing the enchantment, I write about self-actualization by reconciling my identities as a student of critical pedagogy and video game player. In the first part of this section, I describe how Plato's (2014) concept of the gadfly helped me envision new meanings for the intersection of my identities as a student of critical pedagogy and video game player. I describe how I saw myself as powerful and critical when I was in charge of my raid team. I understood leadership as a position rather than a process. Upon giving up the leadership of my team, I saw myself as giving up all power and legitimacy to implement any aspect of criticality in the community I used to lead. I saw myself as pushed to the margin and silent when faced with questionable changes in my community. Plato's concept of the gadfly gave me a blueprint for realizing my power from the margin. In the praxis of stinging: learning to arouse, persuade, and reproach, I show how this blueprint enabled me to see possibilities for stinging my community into consciousness and action. I give concrete examples of the meaningful changes I adopted through this new identity such as abandoning two of the main games I played.

### **Chasm Between Identities: How the Enchantment Enabled Oppressive Forms of Play**

I have identified four themes that constitute the dissonance between my two identities. The first one corresponds to a dichotomy I created between playing for fun and playing to critique. The second theme is entitled consenting to neoliberal forms of play. Through this theme, I describe how in my video gaming habits and experiences I engaged

in ways of playing that perpetuated neoliberal ways of relating to one another. The third theme is the captology gap. Through this theme, I show that I fell victim to psychological and monetary traps in gaming mechanisms while I was aware of their existence. The last theme is confining myself to being an alien in my own world. There, I unveil how even if I saw myself as a member of the video gaming community, I restricted my interactions with others and hid myself. Knowing the place of racism and white supremacy in the video gaming culture, I was afraid that unveiling my minoritized identities would make me a target or make me lose the people I played with. Rather than being present in my community, I suppressed myself. I detailed each theme below. In doing so, I exposed how an important part of my video gaming experiences revolved around habits that were in direct opposition with my identity as a student of critical pedagogy.

Table 5. The Thinking/Entertainment Dichotomy

Thinking	Entertainment
<p><u>What is this game telling me? Passage from May 29<sup>th</sup> field notes on the Housewife.</u></p> <p>The major element in g jousting is the storyline about toxic masculinity. The fact that John thinks of himself as a victim, as being bullied, and the only answer he has is violence, virility, and an idea of success that taps into patriarchy. This game does a good job at portraying the complexity of toxic masculinity/patriarchy:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Swallowed by corporate system (and think deserves more)</li> <li>• High school reunion</li> <li>• Buffing up/exercising</li> <li>• Pressure to show success: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Material</li> <li>◦ Bringing girlfriend</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Claiming ownership of women (picking them up at bars)</li> <li>• Everybody is a penis (men and women)</li> </ul> <p>I still have some questions though:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Why does a womanly voice narrate the game?</li> <li>• Graphics of the game are so much better than TH. Is it easier to achieve better graphic quality with symbolism?</li> <li>• Nobody will ever love you. Troubling memory. Apparently, John is a sexual predator. He does not remember what he did. Which means it is not normal to him? He does not do it all the time? Or this is something available to him on the palette of responses to women saying no?</li> <li>• What class could I use such a game in? Passage from May 25<sup>th</sup> journal entry about Genital Jousting.</li> </ul>	<p><u>Illidan's quest is something bateau (banal in French) about sacrifices and more to make... bla bla. Lore... falls flat again. Passage from June 4<sup>th</sup> field notes on WoW</u></p> <p>My blood was boiling. We ended dominating bot lane. Towards the end of the game I was 5/0/4. This is a big score for playing supp." Passage from May 9<sup>th</sup> journal on LoL</p> <p>"That was great. Two different scenarios. A game we should have never won and somehow pulled through. The other one was huge steamroll. I dont think it's adrenaline but it is a great feeling to walk away having achieved wins, performed well, and contributed to the team's win. Passage from April 24<sup>th</sup> journal entry about LoL</p>

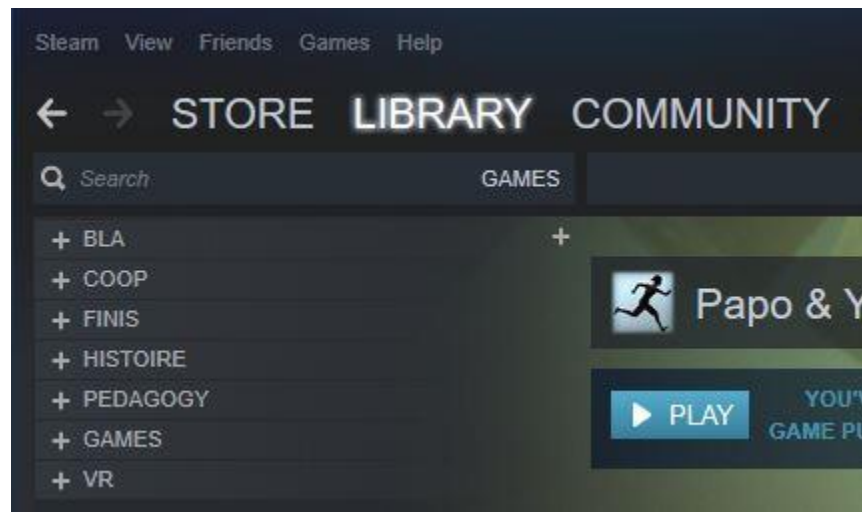
This theme sets the tone for the split between my two identities. I had forged a dichotomy in my playing and in my thinking about video games. I had indeed created two then-invisible sets of video games. One set consisted of games I played to have fun, entertain myself, and escape my daily routine. The other set consisted of games anchored in social commentary. I played these games to critique and analyze them. This dichotomy worked to heighten my critique of video games which openly engaged with social issues and lessen my critique of video games I saw as mere entertainment. The two sets of

quotes I use in the opening of this section show that for the games that tackle social issues such as domestic abuse for *The Housewife* (Colossal Wreck, 2016) or toxic masculinity for *Genital Jousting* (Devolver Digital, 2018), I engaged in a complex questioning of the design decisions made about the game and its meaning. I purchased these games because they tackled social issues. I wanted to know how these themes would transpire in a video game. My journaling and field notes showed that I engaged in questioning the meaning of the possible actions within the game, the meaning behind the size of the house, the meaning behind the sounds, animations, the choice of camera angles... whereas, I seldom questioned the messages of the games I played for fun. My field notes and journaling focused on descriptions of what I was reading, or commentary on my accomplishments in LoL. In WoW, I rarely took the time to read quest texts, and was never fully aware of what I was tasked with. I understood from the little I knew about the quest that I was engaging in a superficial story about honor and necessary deaths.

The way I thought and documented these two games, these two distinct forms of thinking about my play testify to the dichotomy between how I engaged with the games I play based on what I aimed to experience from them. This dichotomy between what I played to enjoy and what I played to critique corresponds to a segregation of my identity as a student of critical pedagogy to games that are advertised as socially engaged. Rather than engage in a continuous and seamless critique. I abandoned my identity as a student of critical pedagogy when playing games that may be the most problematic since they do

not foreground a social responsibility in educating their players. The most glaring aspect of this dichotomy is my Steam library.

Figure 3. Cropped Screenshot of My Steam Library Highlights the Categories I Had Created



*Note: The games in the Pedagogy category are the only ones I systematically and consistently critiqued (screenshot by author, 2018),*

Steam is an online platform through which players can buy games and organize them in a digital library. An overwhelming majority of the games I play are launchable through Steam (only *WoW* and *LoL* are not). Players can create categories of their own making. I had named one of these categories “pedagogy” (figure 3). Under this heading, I placed games which were advertised as taking on social justice topics such as *No Pineapple Left Behind* (Subaltern Games, 2016) which is a critique of *No Child Left Behind* or *Soldats Inconnus: Mémoires de la Grande Guerre* (Ubisoft, 2014) which critiques war. Other categories in my digital library include “histoire” (for games with the “rich story” tag in Steam), “coop” (for games I can play with my son), “finis” (for games

I finished and would not touch again), “bla” (for games I found uninteresting or not worthy of my time), and games (for games I found potentially fun and entertaining and have not played yet or am in the process of playing). Through this categorizing, I show that there are games in which I see potential for addressing social justice topics and others for which I do not. This dichotomy created a setting in which I was most likely to critique the games I placed in the “pedagogy” category. This setting also worked to minimize my critique in all other games I played.

This idea is further exemplified by the way in which I took my field notes. For example, when I played *The Housewife (Colossal Wreck, 2016)*, a game that tackles domestic abuse and which I had placed in my “pedagogy” category, I wrote about how the graphics, animations, mechanics, sounds, and music weighed against the theme that game aimed to tackle. I paid attention to and documented the decor, the landscape, the mechanics instilled in completing levels, the main screen animations, and other details of the game. However, when I played *League of Legends* (Riot Games Inc., 2009), a game I perceived as simple entertainment, my field notes focused on the type of competitive game I played (ranked or normal), which position I selected to play (similar to choosing to be a striker or goalie on a soccer team), whether I played well, if I executed good plays, and whether my team won the game or not. The ways in which I documented my engagement with video games depended on how I perceived them. If I played a video game that foregrounded social commentary, I would center social commentary in my documenting. If a video game did not foreground social commentary, I would center how I played the game for entertainment. This is all the more striking because *LoL* and other



games I play to have fun do have stories, graphics, sounds, animations, and a social message. For example, *LoL* does have a rich story. *LoL* takes place in a world named Runeterra. It has a lore, comic book style stories, character backgrounds, and other elements that bring life to the game beyond the typical matchmaking and competition at the heart of its gameplay. However, I never engaged with the background story and rarely made notes of the game's sexism, violence, and other social systems of oppression *LoL* echoed and reinforced. Shapiro (2006) writes that "we are, in some way, compelled to take the separate and nominally unrelated fragments we encounter in our world, and find ways to connect them together so that they can be understood as whole and related phenomena" (p.78). I engaged in bringing the two fragments that are video gaming and critical pedagogy solely in the context of socially conscious games. I enacted critical principles in only one subset of games. Therefore, I consented to the oppressive systems in the video gaming culture by focusing my criticism on a minute set of games, those which dedicate themselves to social commentary. In that process, I minimized or blinded myself to the toxicity and problems in all the other video games I played. The dichotomy worked to numb my identity as a student of critical pedagogy.

The problematic categorization of my Steam library showcased the segregation of my critique, of my student of critical pedagogy identity, to a minority of video games. This dichotomy between what I have fun with and what I critique shows a naïve and enchanted posture toward the problematic messages of video games that are not advertised as social justice oriented. This is all the more concerning since video games that tackle social issues are usually independent games that are played by few players and

the games I play for fun are more likely tied to mass markets and work to socialize a much larger number of players. There was what I played and what I critiqued. I rarely did both. I kept the enchantment strong by minimizing or making invisible the messages of entertaining games. However, some games I played to have fun did trigger critical reactions. Wildstar (NC Soft, 2014) is one such game.

### **The Case of the Colonizing Heroes**

Wild Star was a mmorpg (the same genre as *WoW*) in which players could choose a role, level up, and take on challenges on their own or as a team. Wildstar brought uncommon and new features to the mmorpg genre. Some of them included player housing, the possibility for players to design their own house, and a vibrant cartoonish style (figure 4). The game's story focuses on Nexus, a "newly discovered" planet. Nexus contains vestiges and secrets of a lost civilization. Fahey (2011) summarizes the story and possibilities behind the exploration of this "new" planet.

Players can choose different paths to take in order to exploit the richness and mystery of the planet Nexus. Explorers conquer the world by climbing its highest peaks and penetrating its hidden inner recesses. Soldiers conquer the land by force, taking on the native creatures left agitated by the Eldan's passage. Scientists comb the planet for secrets, attempting to unravel the mystery behind the powerful race's sudden absence. And Settlers just want to make a new life for themselves. (para. 5)

Two opposing factions venture to Nexus. Players are to pick one of these two factions as they create a character: Dominion, portrayed as evil, and Exiles, portrayed as good. I read the background story as an invitation to colonize a planet. I was given the choice between playing a bad colonizer or a good one. That message was difficult to

swallow for me, a child of colonization. I had hoped that somehow that backbone story would become more elaborate, complex, or nuanced. I enjoyed the cartoonish graphics and the opportunity to play a different mmorpg, a genre I enjoyed. I thought that playing something different from *WoW* might bring something fresh to my video gaming. I wanted this game to work for me.

Figure 4. Wildstar was a Mmorpg Set in a Futuristic Universe.



*It shut down in November 2018 (McWerthor, 2018).*

I did not go far in Wildstar. My history, my identity as a child of colonization flared up. While I wanted this game to work, the normalization of colonization was impossible for me to overlook. I tried both factions. One of the first Dominion quests involved torturing an NPC. I could not do that. I could not engage with what I perceived as gratuitous violence. I deleted that character. Playing an Exile was not much better. Early in the game I was tasked with killing native beasts. What may have been a casual quest for

some players was a mark of colonialism for me. While my intent was to play WildStar for fun, the messages it sent trivialized an identity that defines me. The game banalized colonization at best. The analysis of this moment brought more complexity to the dichotomy. It showed that I deemed intolerable games that targeted my minoritized identities. Therefore, it unveiled that I deemed tolerable and playable games that did not target and hurt my identities. This allowed me to play and support problematic video games that did not target or attack me directly. While an aspect of my video gaming experiences is to escape my mundane life, video games that demeaned my oppressed identities were impossible to enjoy and play.

### **Escapism, Self-suppression and Their Limits**

*I launch WoW. I can't focus on my writing. Hoping to find some sense of satisfaction and come back to it refreshed. Passage from April 16<sup>th</sup> field notes.*

*M+ not to gouge my eyes out cos of Jenny's paper and request. Passage from May 2<sup>nd</sup> field notes*

*Horrible paper to grade. Need mental break and distance. No new posts on Discord. Log in Wow to do Maw M+ to cooldown. (...). Dungeon done. (...) log out. I think about Jenny's paper with less anger. Passage from May 3<sup>rd</sup> field notes.*

Stenseng, Rise & Kraft (2012) provide a helpful theory to ground one aspect of my “play to have fun” experiences. They describe self-suppression as one of two escapist types of play. In self-suppression playing games is interpreted as “an instrument to avoid apprehension of negative aspects of the self and to temporarily direct one’s attention away from disturbing memories, current stressors, or future obstacles” (Kraft, Rise, & Stenseng, 2012, p.22). In other words, self-suppression consists of playing to avoid

“unpleasant thoughts, perceptions, emotions” (Kollar, 2013, para. 3). Players who engage in self suppression play to escape their life difficulties and realities. One aspect of my playing video games is to unwind. I play to have fun and entertain myself at the end of a day. I also play to take a break during the day. For example, I may take a 30mins break while grading papers to play a game of LoL. After that game, I go back to my duties and work refreshed and re-energized. While my stories of escapism are rather soft, other players have engaged with video gaming in ways that have been labelled as signs of addiction. Stories of players preferring video games rather than tending to their family or professional responsibilities make the news regularly. Parents have left their children unfed to die (Thompson, 2011), others have played themselves to death (Ruddick, 2015; Sieczkowski, 2012; Spencer, 2007). My play is the result of a negotiation with Yessica, my wife. These discussions serve as a safeguard against extreme gaming and escapism.

I build on the theory of escapism to explain that in order for the play experience to provide an escape, whether rejuvenating or harmful, two factors must be at play. The first is perceiving a video game as neutral. If the messages a video game sends are aligned with the player’s identities, that player is likely not to see these messages. They are perceived as normal. For example, someone who has no understanding or experience with colonization is unlikely to find a game like Wildstar problematic. The second factor is dismissing the problematic messages of video games by not understanding or minimizing their impact and role in the socialization of its players. Stating that games are not serious, that they are mere entertainment, that they are “just” games ignores the role of media as the “third educator” alongside family and schools (Spring, 2011, p.7). Video

games are an important and growing part of the socialization of players. In both cases, the denial of the problems tied to video games involves some degree of positive emotional and historical relationship between the player and video gaming. We cannot escape to and through video games if they send us back to our minoritized identities, if they remind us that our places in society is on the margin.

**The enchantment hid the dichotomy.** Isolating the critique of video games to socially engaged games has worked to segregate my identity as a student of critical pedagogy. I saw myself as doing good work with games that tackled social justice issues all the while abandoning my critique of video games I played to have fun (unless they clashed with my minoritized identities). When games fed into my dominant identities, the identities that correspond to dominant groups in society (Sensory & DiAngelo, 2017), escapism worked like a charm. Escapism and my dominant identities contributed to the gap between my student of critical pedagogy identity and my video game player identity. This gap, and more importantly its invisibility, made it more likely for me to consent to oppressive messages in the video games I played. Wording my experiences brought this dichotomy to the surface. The dissonance became visible.

### **Consenting To Neoliberal Forms Of Play**

*It does bother me though that there is no community, that they made the game neoliberal in its mechanics. WoWing alone. I do that. I do it so I can save time and do in the game what I find meaningful. Journal entry, Thursday April 10<sup>th</sup>*

Community, a sense of belonging, and realizing our connectedness are important elements of critical pedagogy. Every semester, I show the movie “Precious Knowledge”

(McGinnis & Palos, 2011) to my students. It retraces the battle of Tucson Unified School District school students and teachers to keep their Raza studies program alive. They fought to raise awareness of their demand. One of their initiatives was to jog 110 miles from Tucson to the Arizona state capitol in Phoenix. Their run involved crossing the land of Native Americans. The students and teachers asked the local tribal council for permission to run on their land. Not only did Natives grant them permission, they also ran with the students and teachers. They connected with the students' protest. They saw in it their fight to keep the stories of their people alive, the fight for minoritized people to learn about themselves. Every semester, I fight back tears when I see this moment of togetherness. While I strive to find and form such connections and community in my video gaming experiences, I have found that despite my commitment to my guild and raid team I engage in neoliberal playing practices that stress individualism, dehumanization, and meritocracy. My play experiences contradict my identity as a student of critical pedagogy. In this section, I use two examples that show how I engaged in such neoliberal forms of play. First, I use Braithwaite's (2018) concept of *WoWing alone* to make sense of my using the "looking for dungeon" tool (Dungeon Finder, n.d.) or LFD. Second, I use the example of *Recount* (Resike, 2007), a *WoW* addon that gives numerical data to players regarding their performance and the performance of those they are grouped with.

**LFDing alone.** One of my favorite activities in *WoW* is taking on challenges with other players. Dungeons constitute such a challenge. Dungeons are instances that require five players to coordinate their actions to defeat bosses. These dungeon groups are

composed of one tank, a character who attracts the attention and the attacks of surrounding enemies, a healer, that heals the tank allowing them to more easily survive the attacks of the enemies, and three dps (damage per second), characters who deal a significant amount of damage and are tasked with defeating enemies. This trio of roles is sometimes referred to as the “holy trinity.” Years ago, *WoW* players had to communicate with one another to group up and form dungeon groups. For me, this meant spending time in Orgrimmar, the capital city of my faction, to chat with other players of the same level and lead a group to take on dungeons. Organizing such groups required communication and time. It also provided the grounds to forge relationships with other players as building in-game friendships made the game more enjoyable and sped up the process of finding dungeon partners. Rather than spending time looking for new players to group up with every time, I would start by contacting players I had grouped with in the past and ask them if they wanted to group up again. This system provided the basis for meeting players, and nurturing relationships.



Figure 5. The Looking for a Dungeon Interface, also Known as Dungeon Finder



*Allows players to be matched by a piece of software rather than communicate with one another (cropped screenshot by author, 2018).*

On October 14th 2014, Blizzard implemented the Looking For Dungeon tool (Dungeon Finder, n.d.). This tool is an interface through which players can select their role (tank, healer, and/or dps) and choose the dungeon(s) they wish to queue for (figure 5). LFD will then look for other players in the system and automatically match them to form a group of five random players. This tool saves players the time and responsibility to communicate with one another. The implementation of this tool has hurt an important aspect of the game. It replaced communication and engagement with other players with an automated matchmaking tool.

LFD is one of the elements Braithwaite (2018) qualifies as having “drastically altered WoW as a multiplayer experience and environment” (p.120). Braithwaite identified trends in WoW’s game design that moved the game away from “its early emphasis on small- and large-scale group effort and social encounters”, Braithwaite continues and states that today “WoW is less of a sociable space—there are fewer opportunities or incentives to work toward the same virtual goal with others” (p.120). Over time, game developers added incentives to use the LFD tool. They implemented rewards such as gold, experience points, and random item rewards for roles that are in high demand (usually healers or tanks). The prime reason for the creation of such tools was to eliminate the time required for players to build a social structure to play the game, therefore bypassing an essential element of the MMORPG genre. The rationale was to allow a category of players who did not have time to form groups to access game content for which communication, time, and community was required. Dungeon groups used to be composed of players who were working together to accomplish a common goal (defeating bosses) and possibly create in-game relationships for future dungeons. LFD erased the requirements and benefits of forming community. In LFD, it is highly unlikely that players will want to communicate with one another and work as a team. WoW counts millions of players. It is therefore highly unlikely that they will ever be matched again by this tool. This has created a shift in the running of dungeons and the WoW community. Forming relationships is no longer an aspect of running dungeons. Because players are grouped together by a software, they tend to work toward individual goals without consideration for communication and community. This system makes it more likely that

players run dungeons in order to collect loot, that is to benefit themselves. This is what Braithwaite (2018) refers to as “WoW-ing alone” (p.123), the experience of engaging in a group activity for individual rewards.

While every Thursday night I raid from 8:30 to 11:30 with my team, using the LFD tool was also part of my WoW play. I regularly ran dungeons through LFD. I did not communicate with the players I was matched with. I usually stayed silent. No “hi, how are you doing?” No “good job” or “thank you for the group.” I did not acknowledge being grouped with other human beings. Even worse, there were times during which I behaved out of spite and resentment toward LFD players.

*When on the last boss, I was blamed for not tanking a tentacle. I became furious. I had never seen 2 tentacles on that fight. Not because it is a rarity or a bug, it's because they took so long to kill the first one that a second popped in (...). I stayed in the group nevertheless because it was the last boss and I could have used a +13 reward and weekly reward. On the next pull, they took tons of dmg. I also fell in a hole on the ship and died. I minimized and closed the game from the taskbar. I did that because I did not want to read potential hateful words or blame from them. I also thought “bien fait pour eux. J'ai ruiné leur clé. Ça leur apprendra.” These aren't the words of a loving critical pedagogue. Extract from April 20<sup>th</sup> 2018 journal.*

Here is how I made sense of my LFD experiences: I played the game with people I did not know and whom I would never see again after that dungeon. Why bother with being polite or friendly? My intent was to get in and out, smash buttons and keys to release stress, find quick loot and reward, and be out. I could have been playing with artificial intelligence and would not have noticed. This neoliberal view of group work and relationships is described by Turkle (2011) as “expecting more from technology and less from each other” (p.xii). Turkle describes the many ways technology is enabling us and

driving us to be “alone together” (p.1). She writes that robot pets are introduced in nursing homes to counterbalance the fact that we are spending less time with our aging loved ones. Robots who respond to a name and show affection become a substitution for family members. Teenagers grow up with the idea that a Facebook friendship status or like is the equivalent of a meaningful face to face friendship. Humanoid robots are designed and programmed for the purpose of offering meaningful romantic relationships. WoW is following the same trend. It is moving away from a focus on community to a neoliberal model of play. It fosters a view of community that foregrounds personal benefits at the expense of meaningful connections. I contributed to this dehumanizing trend by embracing a “thing”-oriented tool rather than engaging with a “person”-oriented community (King, 1967).

While I belong to a mega guild and could have found players to run dungeons and quests with through this social structure, I have fallen prey to the convenience of LFD. I have consistently ignored guildmates and guild chat outside of raid time to run dungeons and other game content. I wanted to save myself the time to type and find players to group up with. I casually engaged with individual play in a game that has a history of meaningful social structures. I relied and sought my raidmates for challenges I found engaging and challenging only once a week. My belief in community was enacted punctually. The six other days of the week, I engaged and perpetuated neoliberal ways of playing and being, therefore adding to the rift between my beliefs and values as a student of critical pedagogy and my actions as a video game player.

## Recount

*I am thrown off the platform (by the boss). Dead. (...). I do not dare looking at recount. Passage from April 12<sup>th</sup> field notes.*

Another marker of my engagement in neoliberal play is my use and interpretation of the Recount addon (Resike, 2007). Addons are community created tools that players can download and install to compliment the default game interface. Curse (Curse LLC., 2006), a popular addon website, lists over 6,500 WoW addons. These addons add various functionalities to the game. TomTom (Cladhaire, 2009), among other things, shows one's character's coordinates on the map. Deadly Boss Mods (Mysticalos, 2008) gives visual and/or audio warnings when a boss is about to use a powerful ability signaling to the player that they need to dodge it. Recount records the damage, heals, and other numerical values generated by characters. One of its most popular features is measuring the damage per second of each member in the group (figure 6). This number can be used for several purposes. It can be used as a self-evaluation tool. Players can also use it to see how much or how little each player is contributing to the efforts of the group in downing a boss.

Figure 6. A Screenshot of the Recount Addon



Damage Done	
1. Crucix	13288 (19.4, 28%)
2. Brylith	10071 (16.5, 21%)
3. Rezbob	3195 (16.5, 6%)
4. Bringost	2959 (44.3, 6%)
5. Skeletal Horror	2886 (12.1, 6%)
6. Greilz	2480 (22.2, 5%)

*This shows that Crucix is doing by far the most damage in their group. The players at the bottom of the list are also listed (Wowace, n.d.).*

I have used Recount to judge my value as well as other players' value in LFD runs and in my own raid team. Using recount this way presents two issues. The first is that it constrains a player's performance to their damage output. Through this addon, I have reduced a player's worth to a numerical value produced by a piece of software. In my opening quote, I show how knowing that by dying early in the fight, I could not do a lot of damage on the boss. I was not going to be able to contribute to the team's effort. The bar associated to my name became a mark of shame. There are other factors in the game that comprise a player's performance beside the numerical value indicated by Recount. For example, the ability to execute a boss' mechanics, that is dodging deadly abilities or switching from damaging the boss to targeting minor enemies that may buff the boss. The second issue with using recount to judge a player's value is that it erases that player's identity. Their name is washed from existence. They become a number. Their contribution to a group, their relationships with other players, what they can bring to that community is reduced to a numerical value that cannot account for who they are.

*You think it was that easy. You think that I did not struggle with that decision. It's all good to speak from where you are. You have no pressure. You face no consequences. I coached that kid for weeks. We play the same class. We both play warriors. I quested with him to strengthen a bond. I know what he should be pulling in Heart of fear. I gave him advice. I researched his rotation. I gave him resources. I pointed out gently that he needed to up his DPS. But how many times did we wipe on Wind Lord Mel'jarak because of his low DPS? Enough for raidmates to start whispering me about him. They wanted him out. He is consistently at the bottom of the DPS charts. Everyone noticed. No one can hide from recount. We had reached a wall. The team was not progressing anymore. We were in danger of collapsing. I had to make a decision.*

*Oh. I see what you are pulling. "It's not me. It's the DPS numbers." That sounds like what administrators say when they ignore their own values. Or maybe the DPS meter is your value. You see, you are not so different than these behind-the-*

*desk people you despise. It's when situations get tough that we find out what we are made of. You showed who you are. Numbers over people." Passage from the 'You kicked him' epiphany.*

This way of thinking is aligned with a neoliberal view of relationships. Identities and the sense of community are replaced with numbers produced by software. I contributed to that neoliberal/numerical way of seeing worth in people. I have reduced players I have been matched with through LFD as well as raidmates to their damage output. This reducing of relationships to numbers contributes to the gap between my identity as a video game player and my identity as a student of critical pedagogy.

**The enchantment hid neoliberal forms of play.** By engaging with neoliberal forms of play, I supported ways of dehumanizing *WoW* and the players I played with. I reinforced the harmful idea that playing *WoW* and video games is about in game rewards, numbers, and charts. My use of tools provided by Blizzard Entertainment and the *WoW* community has revolved around values that are not in harmony with my identity as a student of critical pedagogy. I consented to neoliberal forms of play and therefore I consented to neoliberalism.

### **The Gap of Captology**

As a student of critical pedagogy, I am aware that, online or not, we are constantly engaged with problematic and oppressive systems. Capitalism is one such system. It elevates profit above people. Some major video game companies have foregrounded revenue generation in the design of their games through the theory of captology. Fogg (1999) explains that captology is about using computers as persuasive technologies. He defines this type of technology as:

a computing system, device, or application intentionally designed to change a person's attitudes or behavior in a predetermined way. (...). Intentionality distinguishes between a technology's side effect and its planned effect. Captology focuses on the planned persuasive effects of computer technologies. (p.27)

While in some cases, captology has been harnessed to foster positive behavior change such as in health-related matters (Albert, 2004), most the theory of captology has been implemented to orient player behavior toward spending money. Through this theory, video game developers have included mechanisms that keep players tethered to the games they play. I was well aware of captology and its mechanics in the games I played before this project. However, I had failed to question my gaming experiences through the lens of this theory. As a result of this study, I have identified three ways through which I succumbed to captology, three ways that as a student of critical pedagogy, I should have identified and stayed away from or engaged with in a different manner. My non-questioning of my behavior in light of this knowledge contributed to the gap between my identity as a video game player and student of critical pedagogy. The first of these three ways is the gambling aspect of reward mechanics in video games. No matter how low the odds of receiving certain rewards, I kept engaging with specific video gaming activities in hope of receiving these rewards. I entitled this aspect of my playing experiences "Doing it again and again no matter the odds." The second of these three ways is my engagement in activities I did not enjoy for the sole purpose of scoring a reward. I named this aspect "doing it again and again even if I do not like it." The last of these three ways corresponds to the time I would spend seeking rewards obtainable through dull or unchallenging play. I named this "doing it again and again no matter how



dull.” I detail my succumbing to captology in the next section by sharing an example for each of these three ways.

**Doing it again and again no matter the odds.**

*Cracked fel-spotted egg ready. I get an aged yolk :(Passage from June 9th field notes.)*

The cracked fel-spotted egg is a WoW item obtainable by defeating rare monsters. Only four such monsters exist. Once the egg is obtained, I, like any other player, have to wait seven actual days before it hatches. Once the wait is over, the egg has a minute chance of containing a valuable item. The most prized item for me was a mount. After having obtained an egg early June, I was able to click it to hatch it on June 9th. My prize, like many other times, eluded me. The egg cracked to reveal a useless aged yolk. There are many such items in the game that present players with opportunities to try their luck. The most emblematic is the mount of the Lich King, arguably the most epic character of WoW lore: Invincible (figure 7).

Figure 7. An In-game Menu Allows Players to See All the Mounts Available in the Game  
(cropped screenshot by author, 2018)



This bat winged undead horse mount was a reward for defeating the Lich King on 25 player Heroic difficulty when that encounter was current, that is between December 8 2009 and December 7 2010. Blizzard released other expansions after that date. Players were then able to outlevel the encounter. The Lich King fight became obsolete. To account for this change, Blizzard drastically reduced the drop rate of this mount. When it was current, defeating the Lich King on 25 player heroic difficulty had a 100% chance of dropping one Invincible. The team of raiders would have to decide which of the 25 players was to keep the mount that week (like any other raid encounters, the Lich king and his loot resets weekly). With the release of further expansions, defeating the Lich

King on 25 player heroic difficulty now bears a 1% chance of dropping the Invincible mount but the fight is now doable by one character, a team of 25 players is no longer needed.

I tried obtaining that mount once during my observation period. However, I have tried obtaining that mount twenty times since the encounter has become obsolete. The ludicrousness of these attempts is highlighted by the fact that in order to face the Lich King all other bosses of that instance had to be defeated. The Lich King is located in the Icecrown Citadel instance. It counts twelve bosses. Timewise, this represents an investment of roughly thirty minutes of dull boss fighting before reaching the Lich King. I spent thirty minutes dispatching unchallenging enemies before reaching the Lich King and trying my luck at this one arm bandit. That is thirty minutes to get a chance at a 1% gamble.

Invincible is not the only 1% mount run I have engaged in. I attempted such 1% mount runs for Deathcharger's reins (three times), Swift Zulian tiger (one time), Mimiron's head (three times), Onyxian Drake (sixty nine times), ... Most of these mount runs involve less than twelve bosses before reaching the one arm bandit. However, they all culminate to a 1% lottery. All these attempts, all this time spent on trying to obtain these 1% mounts attest of the power captology had on me.

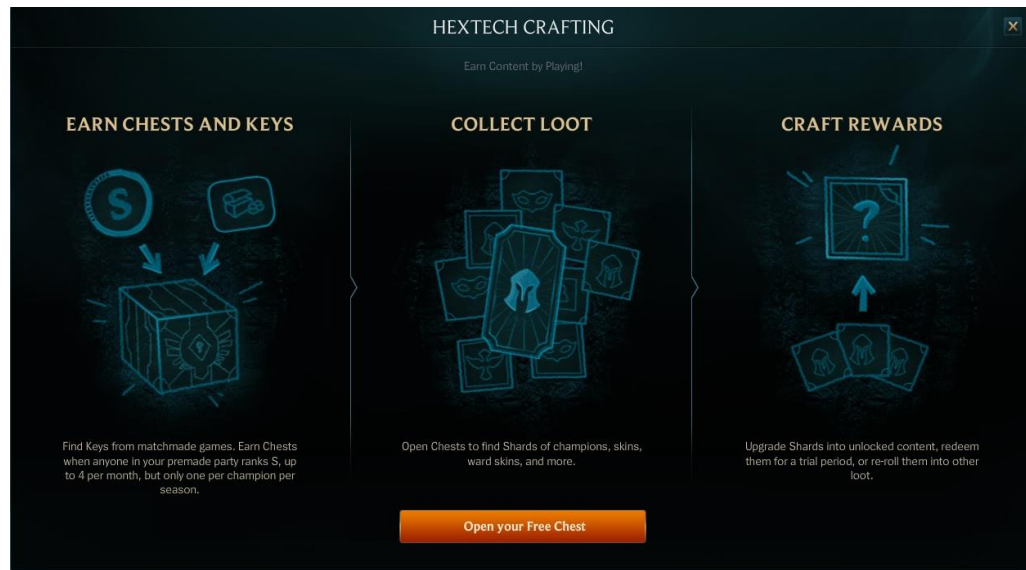
I also fell into the captology trap when I incessantly chased ranked wins in LoL:

*I raged! I could not get over the fact that this adc ruined our game. Imn in the game and he steals red and leaves. I was so pissed. I could not help but chat and complain. I don't like doing this but I had to vent. I had to let it out. I typed and hated on that guy. I dropped the f bomb... a few times. I played to get some air and to resource in order to go back to my work refreshed. I ended up getting so upset I could not focus. It was a ranked game. I was in my promos. There was a lot of pressure. I exploded. At the end of the game I was so upset that I could not get back to work. I had to play another game. Extract from May 9<sup>th</sup> 2018 journal.*

Ranked games constitute the end game of LoL. Each season, players can climb the ladder ranging from bronze to challenger by amassing wins. Each season, players are assigned a starting rank based on last year's performance and a series of ten placement games. Once they are assigned a rank, the goal is to move up. Games can be tense as the stakes are high. Moving up is always a rush. Moving down on the ladder is infuriating and discouraging. Every season, my goal was to reach the gold rank because of its associated reward. In the journal entry above, the pull of that reward was so great that even after I nerd raged (a common gaming term used to note a video game player's anger) I felt compelled to play again. My goal in playing another game and seeking a victory were to quell the anger, fill me with feelings of accomplishment, and take a step toward gold rank season rewards. I succumbed to captology even when playing enraged me and triggered feelings that were not aligned with how I perceive myself.

**Doing it again and again even if I do not like it.**

Figure 8. A Graphic Explanation of the Hextech Crafting Loot System in LoL (Jarettjawn, 2016)



On March 15, 2016, *LoL* introduced Hextech crafting (Hextech Crafting, n.d.). Through this system (figure 9), *LoL* offers the possibility to earn chests by earning an S rank in a match against other players. Ranks correspond to grades players earn after a match. This rank is determined by an algorithm which translates a player's performance into a letter grade such as A, B, C, or S. S is the highest letter grade possible. While there is no official meaning, S is understood as Super or Special. Players can earn one chest per champion per season, roughly a year. The content of these chests is random. They can contain cosmetic rewards and game currency. Skins are a cosmetic reward that is particularly interesting to me because even if *LoL* is a free game to play, skins cost actual dollars. Their price ranges from \$4 to \$25 (Friedman, 2016). Skins have no influence on

gameplay. They provide a variety of aesthetic choices. In *LoL*, their main purpose is to offer different themes for champions. Cheaper skins change the appearance of a champion. More expensive skins change the appearance, animations, voices, and sound effects of a champion.

Figure 9. A Side by Side Comparison of the Default Brand Champion on the Left (Plesi, 2016) and the Zombie Brand Skin on the Right (leaguesales.com, n.d.)



*Zombie Brand is a skin that includes, among other features, unique sounds such as zombie grunts and unique animations such as a dance choreographed after Michael Jackson's iconic Thriller video (Jackson, 2009).*

I catered to that system. Earning S's on champions I played rather well granted me a sense of gratification and recognition. Through these chests I also got a taste of the rewards: I won a few skins. Based on these successes I took the next step and decided to spend time playing with champions I did not like or did not master hoping that I would somehow earn an S. My hope was that I would either be matched against lower skilled opponents or that my teammates would carry me towards that S. I did not obtain an S in

that manner but, lured by the reward, I kept playing (and failing) in such a way. I invested time in playing champions I did not enjoy for that reward. More concerning is the idea that these rewards are totally random. I was likely to win skins for champions I did not play or enjoy. Moreover, these skins were temporary. They lasted a few days. To obtain a random permanent skin, I had to combine three temporary skins. I had to obtain three S's, each with a different champion, to obtain a permanent random skin. Each one of these S's gave me a 50% chance of obtaining a skin shard (Chiptek, 2018). The work of learning to play champions I did not enjoy, the time spent underperforming in games, and the unlikelihood of obtaining these rewards made this whole endeavor unrealistic and a waste of my time. I had to document my actions to see their repetitions and understand how far down the captology hole I was.

**Doing it again no matter how dull.** Another form of my succumbing to captology was my chasing rewards through disinterested and dull actions. For example, *The Secret World Legends* (Funcom, 2017) offers daily login rewards. Through the mere act of logging in to the game, I gained rewards such as skill points and random items (figure 10). Every morning, I would get up, get my breakfast, walk to my computer, launch a youtube Late Show video, eat as I listened to Stephen Colbert, and logged into *SWL* to collect my daily reward. Most of the time, I would not do anything else in that game. I would log off as soon as I had clicked my reward on the screen. It took me longer to load the game than it did validating the reward.

Figure 10. The SWL Daily Rewards Interface



*The SWL Daily Rewards interface pops up as soon a character is loaded for the first time of that day. While SWL is free, players who pay a monthly fee, known as patrons, obtain an additional Daily Reward (u/Elrigh, 2017).*

As I documented my experience, such routines became more and more dull.

Engaging with these tasks felt normal or ok as long as I did not word them. However, my field notes highlighted this mind numbing repetition. As a matter of fact, I used the term “morning routine” in my field notes as a shortcut to write about morning activities such as the SWL Daily Reward. “Morning routine” became an in vivo code. Below is a list of the activities my “morning routine” referred to:

- In SWL:
  - Logging in to SWL
  - Confirming the daily reward
  - logging out of SWL



- In *WoW*:
  - Logging in to *WoW*
  - Completing missions
  - Recruiting troops
  - Starting new missions
  - Using Blessing of Mjolnir
  - Starting the preparation of next Blessing of Mjolnir
  - Logging out of *WoW*

Describing all these actions would be tedious. The main point I wish to make here is that all these actions were accomplished from one location. These actions barely required me to move my character. They were all doable from the location I logged in. At most, I would have to move my character from one NPC to a neighboring one. All I did was to click maps and menus. I stress this aspect because it differs widely from the gameplay I enjoy which involves communicating with my raidmates, strategizing, engaging enemies through action packed gameplay, executing said strategy, and restrategizing in case of failure.

I also engaged in what I referred to as “weekly routines.” These actions and their respective rewards reset every Tuesday at 10:00am EST. These were actions I would take on Tuesday night or Wednesday morning, depending on how much time I had available on Tuesday night. These weekly routines were all tied to *WoW* and included:

- Checking pvp chest
- Defeating the world boss
- Opening Mythic+ cache
- Purchasing two tokens
- Picking up weekly quest

I found myself checking these routines multiple times a week because there is no way in the game to track the completion of these weekly actions. I was afraid I would miss them. The behavior triggered by these rewards was robotic. It was scripted in two ways. First, I followed a set of actions that I repeated from day to day and week to week. Second, my behavior was scripted in the sense that it was coded into the games I played. These mechanics were scripted into the codes of these games. These game mechanics were meant to keep me playing. I knew they were. I followed the script nevertheless because I had not scrutinized my play. I engaged with video games without questioning my behaviors and therefore I acted in ways that did not align with my identity as a student of critical pedagogy.

**The enchantment hid captology.** Knowing about captology and failing to recognize when I succumbed to it shows that the enchantment numbed my critical consciousness. The knowledge I had was not enough to stop or prevent me from engaging in these problematic behaviors. I allowed these game mechanics to own my time and shape my play. However, captology was not the only element informing my play. Captology was connected and interlocked with other aspects of my play. I had come back to *WoW* after a four month break. Four months without loot put me behind my raidmates. My outdated equipment placed me among the last players on Recount. I did not want to hinder my team's progress. I wanted to be an asset to my team. I did not want to be looked at the same way I viewed rock bottom LFD players on Recount. Completing my routine was linked to the progress of my character, which in turn played a role in maintaining my spot on the raid team, which was also linked to playing with my friends.

This made my relationship with *WoW* and my succumbing to captology more complex. However, this was not the case for *SWL* and *LoL*. I had no friends to come back to in *SWL*, no community to be and play with. *LoL* was not much different. I only had two friends and we were rarely online at the same time. When my captology-infused behaviors were linked to critical aspects of my video gaming such as friendship and community, there was a complexity I needed to entangle. I could not justify these behaviors when they were not connected to critical aspects of my video gaming experiences. I could no longer engage in these behaviors and therefore could no longer engage with these games. I have indeed stopped playing *SWL* and *LoL* as a result of this research during my two month observation period. Later in this chapter, I detail this decision and other actions I have taken to reconcile my identities as a student of critical pedagogy and video game player.

### **Alien in My Own World**

*In that podcast, Kevin Roose shared how he joined a discord server to investigate the American white supremacist movement. **Discord. They fucking use discord.** Passage from the "Unite the Right epiphany."*

Being present in the world is an important aspect of critical pedagogy. I believe in affirming one's presence in order to live fully and maintain our humanity (Freire, 2009). While I work to embody this principle in my life, I have identified ways in which I silenced myself in my video gaming experiences. For the purpose of this section, I define silence as recognizing oppressive dynamics at play, knowing that I could and should intervene in some way, choosing not to do or say anything to remain invisible, and

therefore allowing oppression to go on unchallenged and spread. To make this point, I focus on one aspect of the video gaming culture: it perpetuates oppression. Like schooling, video gaming is shaped by the same social forces that are present in society. Video gaming does not exist in a vacuum. Racism, sexism, and white supremacy in the video gaming world are well documented. Gray (2014) wrote about the racist attacks against black women players on Xbox live and their fight against it. Massanari (2017) wrote about the ways in which technologies promote, defend, and allow video game toxicity, such as racism, sexism and white supremacy to exist, subsist, and thrive online. Mukherjee (2018) wrote about the racism and imperialism of video gaming through the lens of Indian players playing games that privilege a colonial view of the world and their country. Once again, I knew about these issues in video gaming but the enchantment, the abandonment of my critical consciousness, worked to numb me and shield me from the realities of my very culture. As a student of critical pedagogy, I tackle many of these issues outside of my video gaming life. I do it through my work as a teacher and immigrant advocate. However, my video gaming behavior is totally different. Silencing myself in the face of oppression is a dominant theme in my video gaming experience. My silence was a sign of my “fear of denouncing injustice;” I was washing my hands in the face of oppression (Freire, 1998, p.101). I identified two main types of such silences.

### **Silences in online games with *LoL* matched players.**

*DOMINATING WIN + Hextech chest. I click on Twitch and go to my ADC's channel. He shows his desktop. His background is that of anime girls wearing mini shorts and flaunting their backside. I could use his help to get my gold rank though. He sends me a friend request. I wait till he is in game to accept. I did not*

*want to play another. I add a note to his name on my friend list: great adc-Jhin.  
Passage from May 9<sup>th</sup> field notes*

I silenced myself when matched with random LoL players who made sexist, ableist, or racist comments in the chat interface and their Twitch.tv channels, a popular streaming website. I felt it was not useful for me to challenge this casual sexism, racism, and ableism with online strangers. I thought that my words and actions would be futile because I did not have any connections with these randomly matched players. To them, I was most likely a nobody they had been randomly grouped with. Someone who would be forever gone after the game. However, in the case of the event I refer to in the excerpt, I saw myself as benefitting from associating with such players. I accepted the friend request from someone who had no issue with being sexist. I even noted on my interface that he was indeed a great player. This shows that I was willing to play with him again because he could help me win games. The pull of the reward annihilated any sense of injustice or obvious dissonance between my identity as a video game player and student of critical pedagogy. My naïveté was a testimony of the internalization of oppressive forces in the video gaming culture (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). As a cis-gender man and someone who is aware of my position of power in the gender and sexuality binary, I should have better embodied the principles I value. I should have questioned my actions and decisions.

Another reason for silencing myself during the game deals with LoL's gameplay. Lol is fast paced and unforgiving. The gameplay presents a barrier to chatting and confronting hateful language. The structure of the game makes it difficult to report

players during the action therefore allowing racist comments and other oppressive comments to exist and flourish. I had to make a choice between playing for a win and enacting principles of critical pedagogy. I chose the former. Kincheloe (2008) writes that “critical pedagogy is dedicated to resisting the harmful effects of dominant power. Advocates of critical pedagogy work to expose and to contest oppressive forms of power as expressed in socioeconomic class elitism, Eurocentric ways of viewing the world, patriarchal oppression, and imperialism around the world” (p.34). Rather than work to resist, expose, and contest oppressive forms of power in video gaming, I chose to silence myself and allow them to go unchallenged. I also benefitted from them. I told myself stories about not being connected to the random players I was matched up with to justify my silences. However, I stayed silent in the face of oppression even when playing with people in my immediate video gaming community. I tell these stories next.

### **Silences with raidmates.**

*Don't look there.*

*Yes, that tiny highlighted “2” tells you exactly how many new messages are in that channel. Don't Look.*

*Yes, it's your raiding group. Yes, it's the team you created. Yes, a few of them are still your friends.*

*Don't look.*

*You got VERY upset the last time you looked in that channel. Maybe this time, if someone put a racist or sexist meme or link, you will find what it takes to call it out.*

*Don't look. Passage from the “Don't look there” epiphany.*

I silenced myself when my own raid mates made sexist and racist comments. I saw my position in the raid team as that of an unknowledgeable and undergeared DPS. This means that in my eyes, because I did not pull big numbers on Recount and was not

knowledgeable about the encounters we faced, I had little influence, social capital, and power in the team. This is all the more disconcerting because I am the founder of this team, which I understood as being responsible for the group's values and reputation. I saw myself as the guardian and enforcer of norms I had worked on implementing from the beginning of this team. I chose the team's name, recruited players, and organized everything from our website to our schedule when the team was officially formed several years ago. Because of work and school, I had to step away from this leadership role and had named a new leader to succeed me. Over the years, the composition of the team changed. New players flooded in and original ones left. I no longer recognized the team I had founded, a team in which casual racist and sexist comments would have been addressed. This statement is not about trying to identify who my teammates are and how they think. The scope of this project is autoethnographic and not ethnographic. I am focusing on my experiences and perspectives, in this case my silences, to make sense of my experiences. These comments presented an opportunity to engage with my teammates and explore the "unstated ideologies hidden between the sentences" (Kincheloe, 2008, p.16). I could have communicated with them in order to help them expose the roots of their words and thinking. Instead, I repeatedly failed to honor my identity as a student of critical pedagogy.

*Don't look.*

*Just yesterday someone mentioned the Pewdiepie story in raid chat, one of these youtubers who makes money by insulting his viewers and making racist jokes. "I really don't care for this. We are here to down bosses and make progress. Your discussion has no place here. Focus!" That is how one of our leaders shut that conversation down, in the name of 'playing.' How do you think they would react once you point out their racism and sexism? How do you think they would react if*

*you actually engage with what they are saying and laughing about. Don't look. Passage from the "Don't look there" epiphany.*

The identity of the team had shifted and with it mine. I went from an official position of leadership to feeling like an expendable player. Many of the newer players on the team were unknown to me as I was to them. I felt powerless in addressing these issues and therefore did not take action. I silenced myself. The quote I opened this section with captures this alienation and silence, this refusal to face my responsibilities as a student of critical pedagogy. It is taken from a story I wrote about a specific channel on our discord server. This channel is dedicated to posts that are deemed silly and funny. It is an amalgam of posts that include jokes and memes on all kinds of topics, quite a few on questionable topics. My refusal to consult this channel was grounded in my impossibility to imagine power from anything else but the position of leader. I made the conscious decision never to click on that channel. I did everything I could to stay away from it, especially when I would see notifications about new content posted there. Freire (1998) writes that "women and men are capable of being educated only to the extent that they are capable of recognizing themselves as unfinished" (p.58). I played in a space where I saw myself stuck and incapable of movement and action. My identity became a ball and chain. I had failed to recognize my power and the possibilities I had to change and to act in a more socially conscious way.

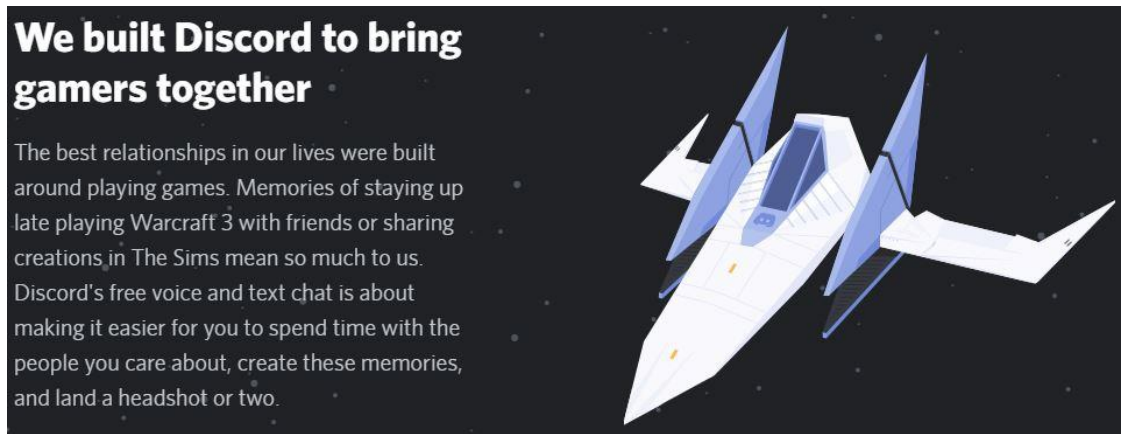
These silences contributed to my feeling as the "other" in my own video gaming community. The more I read and learned about the oppressive facets of video gaming the more I felt like an outlier. Instead of feeling enraged and moved to act as I was in my



advocacy work, I felt overwhelmed, paralyzed, and impotent. I had internalized power and its exercise in terms of position. I saw possibilities for speaking up and shaping my team's values only when I was the leader, only when I held an official position. While my actions might have not always been aligned with my identity as a student of critical pedagogy then, I saw my rank as powerful and exercised the power I saw in it. Because of this view of power, leaving the leadership of the team also meant abandoning all power and possibility to act. I locked myself in a space where I could no longer envision possibilities for action. As I continued researching video gaming, any new information that deepened my understanding of the imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchal grip on video gaming worked to feed my impossibility to envision just actions in my raid team. Such was the case when I heard about the connection between video games and the Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville.

**Discord and Charlottesville.** On August 12, 2017, white nationalists gathered in Charlottesville, VA to protest the removal of a confederate statue by local officials (Astor, Caron, & Victor, 2017). Members of the Proud Boys, Identity Evropa, Traditionalist Worker Party, Ku Klux Klan, and Vanguard America marched on Charlottesville to protest this removal (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017). Their chants included “blood and soil,” “Jews will not replace us,” and “white lives matter” (Heim, 2017). This protest was organized through an application named Discord (Roose, 2017). Discord is described on its official website as an application that aims to “bring gamers together” (Discord, 2015; figure 11). It is a platform that resembles a combination of Facebook, Twitter, and Skype.

Figure 11. A Screenshot of the “About” Section of the Official Discord Website  
(Discord,2015)



Available on smartphones and computers, Discord is a platform for players to communicate in and out of the video games they play. My raid team has a server, a home, in Discord. We use it to talk strategy and coordination when we take on challenging content. Outside of raid, we post comments about the latest *WoW* features. We share videos and songs. We also organize events similar to Secret Santa.

Organizers of the Unite the Right rally created such a server. They used it to discuss their plans. They posted pictures during the rally for those who were unable to attend. After the killing of Heather Heyer by one of their members, they gathered to brainstorm future rallies. My finding out about the connection between Discord and the Unite the Right rally shocked me. It should not have. I knew that white supremacy was sheltered in my culture, that the tools put in place to address it were inadequate and inefficient. My emotions are a testimony of my naïveté. My identities, as an immigrant, an Arab, a student of critical pedagogy placed me on the margin of world, video gaming or not. While I felt these were identities of action outside of video gaming, I saw these

same identities as powerless in video gaming. My margin identities became heavy, static, passive, and shackling in front of my screen. The more I learned about the video gaming culture, the more paralyzed I was. I somehow was not influenced by my knowledge of critical pedagogy. It took a back seat. I proceeded to seeing myself as an alien in my own world. I realized my place on the margin and stayed there. I accepted it quietly and meekly. Part of me was afraid of losing the team I had created. I was longing for a group which I mistakenly thought I had shaped as an island of justice in an ocean of oppression. However, it took this examination of my experiences to understand that in many ways, I had been leading from a pyramidal view of power. I understood power starting from the top and ending at the top. I was longing for that, a group in which I had held power and could fight back against comments made by my teammates. It is only through the critical examination of my experiences that I was able to name this longing for what it was: a longing for power based on a failure to see and implement leadership from a critical model. Writing about my actions in my video gaming experiences has forced me to reflect on my silences in this culture, in my guild, and in my own raid team.

At the onset of my study, I did expect to find problematic behaviors in my experiences. The gap between my identities as a student of critical pedagogy and video game player is the first set of problematic cogwheels at play in my enchantment. While I did not expect to expose such a chasm between two of my core identities, the second set of cogwheels is the one that surprised me the most. Through the scrutiny of this study, I found that the ways through which I thought I enacted critical principles were a mirage. I detail this supposed praxis, another facet of my enchantment, in the next section.

## **Enchanted Resistance**

Through this study, I have examined my video gaming experiences and therefore the ways in which I enacted critical principles in this hobby. I have found that there is a disconnect between the way I perceived these actions and their actual alignment with critical pedagogy. These enchanted ways of enacting critical pedagogy were clouded by the unexamined memories and joys this medium had provided me with. I have identified three themes that compose this enchanted resistance: still born actions for actions I initiated but did not support long term, non-actions for being content with refusing to engage in oppressive behavior and doing nothing more, and the blind support of others' social justice work for finding solace when supporting questionable so-called social justice initiatives. For each of these forms of enchanted resistance I share one example of that resistance and show how disconnected it is from praxis.

### **Still Born Actions**

*Hey*

*I know that there is a "no politics policy" in our rules but I would like to know if there have been any talks among officer or members regarding an initiative about the decisions made by the current administration. Our guild is US based but we count people who are not American and who may want some support or simply hear a message of compassion. Is that off the table? Passage from the Softbear epiphany.*

On January 27th, 2017, President Donald Trump signed what is commonly known as the Muslim ban. The ACLU (2017) describes it as “an Executive Order that banned foreign nationals from seven predominantly Muslim countries from visiting the country for 90 days, suspended entry to the country of all Syrian refugees indefinitely, and

prohibited any other refugees from coming into the country for 120 days” (para. 1). Protests erupted as many opposed this Islamophobic and demagogic act. I too felt I needed to do something. As an immigrant, as the son of Muslims, as the father of a child who is connected to Islam, and in view of the storm of hate that was being unleashed since the involvement of candidate Trump in the political and social landscape of this country, I felt it was my duty to intervene. The national stage was out of reach, but I could do something locally. The core of my actions was done through advocacy groups I was already a member of. I spoke at community meetings and pointed out the shortcomings of local school leaders in addressing the rise of racist language and attacks in their schools. I had not thought about acting through video gaming when one evening, as I was surfing the web, I ran into online posts about Muslim players acting in a game to bring awareness and resistance to the Muslim ban. A player had decided to dress their character with a hijab, an option allowed by the game they played. These actions made me want to act online, to act within my guild to bring awareness to this ban and to Islamophobia. I felt that my guild was the most meaningful space to act in because it connected me to my guildmates. My guild counts thousands of players mainly located in the US. Acting through my guild could therefore reach many people.

My guild, like many others, has a set of policies that members must abide by. One of them includes leaving politics out of game chat, Discord, and other ways of communication. I knew that any intervention regarding the Muslim ban would break these policies. To avoid being kicked out of my guild and no longer be able to act as an agent of change in my community, I contacted Sharphammer through a private message.

Sharphammer was an officer, someone with high standing in our guild, but he was also a member of my very own raid team. He was someone I had a gaming relationship with. I was not an anonymous member of the guild for him. By reaching out to a powerful member of the guild who knew me, I hoped to alleviate the chances of forceful feedback. The private message I sent him asked about possibilities for addressing the creeping of hate in the USA. I asked how the guild could show support for our guildmates who are immigrants and/or Muslims. I crafted that message stressing the importance of nurturing a supportive environment, one of our shared guild values. I sent this private message on March 12, 2017. Sharphammer never answered it and never mentioned it in our weekly raids. Scared of being banned, I never followed up. The rules of our guild muzzled me. I risked being kicked out by sending a public message or reaching out to other officers. This was not something I took lightly. The only content I enjoy in WoW requires team work and skill, also known as end-game content. A team of dedicated players is therefore necessary. To gauge player commitment and skill, many end-game guilds have developed complex procedures to test and recruit members. These range from online applications to trial runs. Moreover, I have been part of two guilds that counted just enough members to put together one raid team. In each case, the raid leader left WoW and the guild fell apart. I found myself guildless and having to start the application process again. Being part of a megaguild eliminates this issue. When players leave the game, there is still a large pool of guild members to tap into. This goes further than video games though. Video games in general and WoW in particular have given a platform in which to find people to play with. WoW has become a space which has come the closest to filling the hole of losing

my friends in France. Leaving this megaguild involves more than having to redo the work of finding other people to play with. Leaving this megaguild would send me back into a space of loneliness and isolation I suffered from for several years before finding WoW. As imperfect as my video gaming relationships are, I see myself as needing them in order to continue working toward filling that hole.

*Cider is ok but not that sweet.  
It tastes of apples and defeat.  
Trying to drink my way to friends.  
Trying to drink my way back to France.*

*Nerd screams are good.  
Give me a sense of brotherhood.  
They just aren't enough.  
Nothing like Pierre's laugh.  
--Passage from the "Stuck with songs and cider" epiphany.*

An important aspect of my playing WoW is the endless pursuit of home, the fleeing of a country where I became the other as I entered it. I long for a sense of belonging. WoW and my megaguild have brought me closer to that goal even if they may never help me reach it. This epiphany captures this longing and the inevitable failure of looking for the replication of connections I lost when I left my friends in France. I was trying to recreate the same sense of belonging I had with pen and paper role playing friends through video gaming. While these two activities share similarities such as fantasy world and character building, they also involve stark differences such as not being in the same space together, and the possibility to hide behind an interface or refuse to share certain aspects of our identities that can't be hidden in face to face interactions.

*I am stunned. How long has it been? We journeyed together from the mountains of Icecrown citadel to the green hills of Pandaria for close to three years. Here is someone I have called a friend for that long. I realize now that I had never heard his voice before. No, not exactly. It is not his voice that stuns me. It is what his voice says about him. How much his voice says about my prejudice and ignorance. Orzul. The troll hunter. The tamer of wolves. Orzul. One of our Canadian players. Orzul. The one who occasionally misses raid night to attend his girls' school plays.*

*Three years without a word in vent or mumble. Three years of listening and typing. And then, after what looked to be a usual Thursday night, while we were casually debriefing and talking, he unloaded a bomb on us all. Was it an Indian accent? I thought he was Canadian? Well, now I know I thought this meant White straight "flawless" English speaking Canadian. Really all I knew was that he lived in Canada, my prejudiced story about him flowed from that. I was so ignorant. In what other ways am prejudiced? How much do I actually know about those I play with? How much are they holding back? I am not telling them everything about myself, why am I expecting them to? Passage from "The Accent" epiphany.*

The assumptions I made in my connections with the players in my team served to give me a naïve sense of connection with them. This also played a role in making me think that I had created a community aligned with critical principles. Through this study, I understand that the connections I had worked to forge were not as ideal as I had thought them to be. Nevertheless, because, we as people, need connections and one another to be fully human, I engaged in the pursuit of meaningful relationships because my happiness and sanity depended on it.

Beyond my raid team, our guild policies are designed to keep players shielded from politics, to create a blissful bubble. However, in light of this silence, our guild values of support and community do not extend to those under political attack, those who are rejected to the margins of society. Our guild policies work to keep privileged players shielded from the struggles of our most vulnerable guildmates. They shield those



unaffected by oppression from the stories and lived experiences of minoritized guildmates. I never pushed further. I felt restrained by the community I called my own and have been part of for seven years. Under the guise of an apolitical community, my guild keeps certain players safe and ignorant while reminding those on the margin that, whether in or out of game, they are outliers. This action, like others that fall under this theme, were still born. I stopped at the first barrier. I felt I could not do more. These unaccomplished plans contributed to my enchanted resistance: the illusion that I was doing something critical and meaningful.

### **Non-Actions**

*After the game, the adc friended me. I accepted. He linked his twitch channel. I went there and saw that he had his desktop up... a drawn girl laying down on her side wearing tiny shorts. Nvm. I did not follow the channel but the guy is still on my friend list. Journal entry, Wednesday May 9th.*

Sexism is rampant in the video gaming culture. One of the most glaring examples of sexism in the video gaming culture is #gamergate. I use the # in #gamergate to mark its social media origin as the toxicity of anonymity in social media played a role in the aggressivity and propagation of this movement. # is a tool used on Twitter to highlight a keyword. It allows for posts about that keyword to be searched and found easily. # allows for discussions about that keyword to spread widely and rapidly.

#gamergate started in 2014 when Zoë Quinn, a female game developer, was accused over social media of trading sex with a game reviewer for positive reviews about her video game “Depression Quest” (2013). Even if the reviewer had never actually reviewed the game (Morano, 2014), the accusations took a life of their own. They turned

into a “harassment campaign” on websites such as 4chan and Reddit (Johnston, para. 2, 2014). The campaign included “detailed discussions and investigations into her sexual history, the leaking of nude photographs, ‘doxxing’ to find out her real life details, death and rape threats, and attempts to bully her and her supporters out of the industry” (Heron, Belford & Goker, p.23, 2014). The perpetrators of #gamergate claimed their efforts were about “retaining the ethics in game journalism” (Heron, Belford & Goker, p.23, 2014). Indeed, members of the #gamergate movement “allege that there is corruption in video games journalism and that feminists are actively working to undermine the video game industry” (Chess & Shaw, p.210, 2015). There are many issues with this statement. One of them is the prejudice that feminists are not part of the video gaming community, that they are outsiders. Through this statement, #gamergate proponents are affirming that the video gaming culture belongs to players who do not identify as feminists.

I have seen many elements of sexism in my own video gaming experiences. I myself even engaged and perpetuated sexism in the video game culture. One of my epiphanies retraces how, some fifteen years ago, I used to use the word “whore” to tentatively demean an opposing player’s dominance in a team match. At that time, I used the term without understanding its connotations and ramifications. I used it because I had heard it. I acted like a parrot replicating what other players had typed. That term did not make sense to me in that context. I did not understand how qualifying someone as a “whore” was connected to their dominating performance. However, my exposition to its constant use and my wanting to fit in led me to see that term as normal. It took the intervention of an unknown player to make me question this insult and my using it.

Because I was incapable of justifying my use of the term to them, because I was forced to face my own ignorance (Diller, 1998), I decided to stop using it. In doing so, I saw myself as cleansed. By no longer typing sexist insults and comments, I saw myself as resisting sexism in video games, never mind that I played video games like *Shank 2* (Klei, 2012), *WoW* (Activision Blizzard, 2004), *LoL* (Riot Games Inc., 2009), *The Witcher* (CD Projekt Red, 2008), *Castle Crashers* (The Behemoth, 2012) and others that depict women as sexual objects or damsels in distress and men as brutal warriors guided by fame and/or lust. I use the term “non-actions” to qualify this non perpetuation of overt oppressive messages while tacitly engaging in others. Schwalbe (2007) writes that “choosing not to support arrangements that are harmful or unjust” (p.27) is a way to resist oppressive facets of the social world. He sees in this choice a conscious act. While this is indeed a form of resistance, it is individual. It does not accomplish much in terms of impacting the culture I am part of. “Non-actions” do not constitute praxis.

I have found many other forms of non-actions in my field notes. For example, when surfing Twitch.tv (the most popular website for video gamers to stream their play), I refused to watch or click the “follow” button on video game streams that use sexist terms or include degrading or sexualized depiction of women. Of course, “follows,” “likes,” and “dislikes” can play a role in a culture where the accumulation of such clicks can generate revenue, visibility, prestige, and influence. However, identifying as a student of critical pedagogy implies the understanding of one’s responsibility to enact just change, the responsibility to enact praxis. While supporting social justice work can be aligned with critical pedagogy, the context in which I did so was problematic. “Not

clicking” is superficial. Seeing praxis in the continuous practice of not engaging with problematic behaviors is not representative of acting for just change. Even more problematic is that these non-actions reinforced the illusion that I was enacting principles of critical pedagogy in my video gaming experiences when I was doing close to nothing to implement meaningful change. These non-actions worked to make me feel fulfilled. Through non-actions, I navigated my culture gleefully and content with this illusory praxis. This contributed to my enchantment. I thought of myself as doing good work and therefore made actual significant actions impossible. Through non-actions I kept the enchantment strong and vibrant.

### **The Blind Support of Others’ Social Justice Work**

*I did find this bully hunter website. These women are on a mission. I will do what I can to support them. Journal entry, Thursday April 12th*

This type of action, the blind support of other people’s social justice work, is the third component of my enchanted resistance. This type of then-perceived critical action required little of me. These actions were punctual and isolated. I did not have to follow up with them and never did. A few clicks here and there and my ‘work’ was done. I detail one such example below.

#### **The case of bullyhunters.**

*I read the Polygon.com article ‘bullyhunters.org.’ I go to Twitch and subscribe to that channel. Passage from April 12th field notes.*

Bullyhunters.org was formed in the middle of 2018 to intervene and address toxicity in Counter Strike: Global Offensive (Valve & Hidden Path Entertainment, 2012) also known as CS:GO. This game is a first-person shooter in which two teams of players face each other in different scenarios. No matter the scenario, the game involves killing the opponents either because that is the only goal of that specific scenario or because opposing players stand in the way of the goal, such as capturing their flag. CS:GO is referred to as a Players Versus Players game (PvP). Harassment is rampant in games that pit players against one another. The stress on competition and winning coupled with the anonymity of online gaming exacerbates feelings of domination and failure especially toward minoritized people. Bullyhunters.org aimed to curb this harassment. Any player who was being harassed could signal members of bullyhunters.org through that website. The report would then be assessed and upon validation of the complaint a member of the bullyhunters.org team would be sent to the harassed player's game in order to "take out an offending player if the case is determined to be severe enough" (Alexander, 2018, para. 7). I decided to support that initiative because it took harassment head on. I did have some concern over how they would determine what consisted in a "severe enough" offense, but I had understood their goal as similar to that of the black women players Gray (2014) had written about. After reading the article, I followed their social media and twitch accounts to give them more visibility and to contribute to their mission. I felt I was doing something meaningful and helpful. I relied on Twitch.tv to notify me when their stream would go live. I wanted to see how this initiative would unfold. At that time, I saw this as a connection between critical pedagogy and video gaming. I believed this was

critical work. Using in game violence to address in game bullying was problematic but something was being done about toxicity in video gaming and this was enough for me. I thought that whatever was wrong with bullyhunter.org could eventually be fixed. Bullyhunters.org could work as the foundations of a socially just action or movement. I had blindly liked the few social media sites I was present on to help this initiative.

There are many issues with this blind support. The first is that it relies on “likes” and “follows”, mechanics Massanari (2014) has shown are promoting a toxic culture. I was using the master’s tools in a futile hope of dismantling the master’s house (Lorde, 1984). My clicks bore no potential for dismantling the systems I was actually participating in and complicit with. The second is that I found fulfillment in a quasi-meaningless series of empty clicks. The third is that this action required no follow up, no continuous engagement. The emptiness and meaninglessness of this blind support was highlighted months after my social media clicks.

When analyzing my data, I researched bullyhunters.org and found out that the website and initiative had been shut down just 72 hours after it had started. Concerns were raised around the methods used to evaluate and address the bullying (Grayson, 2018). Taking down bullies was perceived as a way to inflame a situation rather than to address it. Moreover, social media posts of Nati Casanova, a member of the bullyhunters.org team, were dug up and shared (Alexander, 2018). Casanova had used misogynic insults in her social media accounts (figure 12). The anti-bullying initiative was then portrayed as disingenuous and illegitimate. Sponsors fled the organization.

Within a few days, the initiative's website and social media accounts were taken down.

Bullyhunters.org went nowhere.

Figure 12. Mysogynic Insults



*Nati Casanova posted misogynic insults a few months before bullyhunters.org went live (Alexander, 2018).*

Learning about the failure of bullyhunters.org months after its death adds to the ineffectiveness of my support and to the shallowness of my actions. I had then interpreted my liking and following as critical actions. The comforting thoughts and feelings of these blind actions colored me happy. The questioning, an essential characteristic of critical pedagogy and social justice (Hyttén, 2006), of my feelings and thoughts was absent. I was in a stagnant and unproductive space. The enchantment worked to anesthetize my capacity to question my actions. I was oblivious to the realities and emptiness of these

clicks. After the sparkles of the clicks faded, I still had a colorful and false memory to latch on. The enchantment worked like glitterdust in my eyes.

Other examples of my blind support include my clicking video gaming articles that tackled topics such as racism and sexism in the video gaming world, following social justice oriented Twitch channels, and adding social justice games to my Steam wishlist for the purpose of supporting them by giving them visibility. In the end, all these actions share a sense of shallowness in regard to their impact on the video gaming culture. They also worked to keep me blissfully ignorant. They kept me naïve. They kept me enchanted. Video gaming as enchantment provided me with a space to build my identity, it gave me powerful moments that helped me find myself. I was aware of these aspects throughout my life. The questioning of religion through ActRaiser helped me build an identity as a non-religious person. Other epiphanies along the way gave me powerful experiences in terms of identity building. Video games like *Soldats Inconnus: Mémoires de la grande guerre* (Ubisoft, 2014) have given me a space to question and develop my identity as an immigrant father:

*Through that game, I talked to Ulysse about France and Algeria. Beyond the geography, I also shared the story of his great grandfather, an Algerian man who fought under the French flag during World War two. I wanted him to know about this now, not in his late thirties like me. I wanted him to understand the complexity of his identities. I found in a medium we both enjoy a way to connect to one another and to our stories. As father and son, I want us to spend time together, to build bonds. Tonight, as I play that song, I see that he is shaken. His eyes are red.*

*“What’s happening? I thought you liked this song. I thought you liked piano.”*

*“I do but it is sad. It’s a sad game. It reminds me of it.”*



*I stop the song and find another more cheerful tune to listen to.*

*Should I have played a game about war with him? Do Children in Syria have a choice about the war they are in?*

*I can't help but feel that as sad as the game is, the song created a bond between him and I. I created a memory. Is this traumatic though?*

*When do you talk to your child about the horrors of life, especially those they will face? Should I shelter my son from hurt or prepare him for a world that sees him as an aberration? When do you give your children a talk about the place that has been forged for them in the world? How do I as a parent know if what I am doing is right? Passage from the "Mémoires de la Grande Guerre" epiphany.*

My identities as an immigrant and parent intersect in a way that echoes that of my parents. I have used video gaming to link my son to my root countries in a way my parents did not attempt or were never successful with. There is a lot I do not know about Algeria. I know that it will take considerable effort for me to educate my son into his French and Algerian roots. The distance between him and these countries is a barrier. Therefore I see it as my responsibility to dive into these discussions and experiences with him. Video gaming offered me a space to do that. However, like any other enchantment, I was blind to the full spectrum of my engagement with this medium. I was aware of issues in the video gaming culture such as using video games to parent Ulysse that could affect him in problematic ways. As I gained literacy in critical pedagogy, I was able to better identify problems in my engagement with video gaming. However, the power of the enchantment is that it worked to blind me to the problems of actions I saw as representative of my identity as a student of critical pedagogy. Holding critical knowledge was an important step in my self-actualization process. I reinterpreted my schooling experience and moved away from thinking that my ignorance about the

Algerian War of Independence was the result of my failures as a child. I gained a sense of agency as a public school teacher and immigrant advocate and worked to improve the lives of students and immigrants in my communities. In comparison, my identity as a student of critical pedagogy in video gaming was muffled. Because video gaming had served as an identity building tool, I felt I had power over it and I did. I used the video gaming space to build a raid team and used video gaming experiences to question the world and my place in it. However, its power over me remained invisible because it was entangled with powerful stories I have held dearly. Becoming a student of critical pedagogy is not an end point though, it is a process. While I adopted principles of critical pedagogy in many aspects of my life, it was easier to do that work in institutions and spaces that were detached from me and my identities. My point is not about whether I was a good or bad student of critical pedagogy, but on the necessity as students of critical pedagogy to question the very elements that have brought us happiness and meaning since our childhood, that is to examine the stories and media that have helped us build ourselves as children, before we gained critical literacy.

### **Addressing the Enchantment**

The documenting and journaling of my video gaming experiences provided a mandatory space for me to reflect on the intersection of my video gaming and student of critical pedagogy identities. The process of collecting data was more than the recording of information to be analyzed later. Coding was ongoing (Saldaña, 2009). It occurred as I collected data. I made preliminary sense of the data I was gathering. I identified two major concerning patterns during the documenting of my play: a chasm between two of

my core identities and an enchanted resistance. I was under the spell of unexamined experiences and was happy to be subjected to it. The enchantment allowed me to continue my blissful engagement with a cherished medium while allowing me to think that I was in alignment with my critical self.

My daily journaling and field noting made this chasm and enchanted resistance intolerable. The high frequency of the documentation and journal reflections made it impossible for me to forget, ignore, or escape what I was wording. The structure of the study played an essential role in exposing the enchantment. I could no longer continue to pretend that there was a strong alignment between my identities as student of critical pedagogy and video game player. I opened myself up to a process of continuous self-examination and “self-actualization” (hooks, 1994, p.14). I was exposing the cogwheels that composed my video gaming experiences, many of which did not reflect critical pedagogy. I exposed the enchantment. In the next section, I focus on the changes I made to my video gaming habits as a direct result of this autoethnographic study. As I educated myself on my own thinking and behavior, I formed myself as a more reflective being more in sync with his core principles (Freire, 1998). My goal is not to move from being a bad student of critical pedagogy to being a good one. This good/bad binary is value laden and not helpful. There is no good or fixed state for students of critical pedagogy. There is no point at which we cease to question. Rather, my goal is to continue engaging in the process of liberation and becoming. I did and do recognize that the unexamined video gaming aspect of my life was problematic and that my enchantment created a chasm between my identities as a student of critical pedagogy and my identity as a video game

player. I therefore saw the necessity to reconcile these two identities. I explain how the metaphor of the gadfly helped me in envisioning and embodying this process.

### **Bridging the Identity Gap: The Gadfly**

Each man, outside his professional activity, carries on some form of intellectual activity, that is, he is a “philosopher”, an artist, a man of taste, he participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought. (Gramsci, 1971, p.9).

Researching how I navigate the video gaming culture was more than writing down a description of my behavior and playing habits. It became a way to question my practices. The cogwheels I had identified were not the ones I had anticipated. They made the clock function in a way I did not expect. This project also created a space for me to reflect on the dissonance between how I thought of myself and how I acted in my video gaming. It triggered a process of self-actualization. I unveiled the enchantment and in exposing it, I broke it. As I examined my play, I worked to reconcile my two identities. I have made choices and found ways of playing and navigating video gaming that better represent my identity as a student of critical pedagogy, the identity the enchantment had worked to subdue. Plato’s metaphor of the gadfly has been helpful to me in shaping this new identity. That metaphor now serves as the overarching theory for my being and acting in my video gaming experiences. In this section, I start by explaining Plato’s metaphor and how I made sense of it in my video gaming experiences. I then write about the changes I adopted during my observation period to embody and enact the gadfly.

**Making sense of the gadfly.** Powerful Athenians saw Socrates as a nuisance.

They saw in him someone who questioned society and the powerful as well as someone who taught youth to question everyone and everything around them. This did not sit well with people in power who preferred obedience. As a result, they tried Socrates for corrupting the minds of youths. He made the following statement in his defense:

And now, Athenians, I am not going to argue for my own sake, as you may think, but for yours, that you may not sin against the God by condemning me, who am his gift to you. For if you kill me you will not easily find a successor to me, who, if I may use such a ludicrous figure of speech, am a sort of gadfly, given to the state by God; and the state is a great and noble steed who is tardy in his motions owing to his very size, and requires to be stirred into life. I am that gadfly which God has attached to the state, and all day long and in all places am always fastening upon you, arousing and persuading and reproaching you. (Plato, 2014, p.29)

While making a case against those who wanted his death, Socrates explained that he and they were connected. No matter how alien they considered him, Socrates saw himself as linked to them. They were part of the same Athenian society. The horse and the gadfly are different but they are not strangers. Their relationship is necessary for both of them to move forward. They have an interdependent existence. I interpret this aspect of Socrates' monologue as the need to do critical work in my community. I cannot be a gadfly to a community I do not have bonds with. I can only do critical work among people I have a relationship with. I can only embody the gadfly in a State I share with other people, with other players. That State is my guild.

This realization has led me to make the most drastic and meaningful changes in my video gaming experiences. I understood that I needed a community to embody the

gadfly. I already had a community to work with in *WoW*. This was not the case for *SWL* and *LoL*. I saw only two options for these two games. I could look for *SWL* and *LoL* communities and join them or I could leave the games and dedicate myself to the only online game I had a social structure for: *WoW*. I chose the latter. As a result of this study, I stopped playing two of the main games I had been involved with for years. On April 21st 2018, I uninstalled *LoL* and *SWL* from my computer. While this decision has a clear cut date, leaving these games was a process. I faced constant reminders of the presence of these games in my life and of the pull they had on me.

Over the rest of the observation period I documented deleting tabs related to these two games on my desktop and laptop, unsubscribing from youtube channels tied to these games, unfollowing Twitch channels... I still had to deal with the presence of these games weeks after they were gone from my hard drive. This led me to see how invasive these two video games were in my life, first in terms of time (mainly through captology) but also in terms of space as I continuously ran into saved screenshots, Discord messages, and other video game articles tied to these games. Even after erasing ties to *LoL* and *SWL* I was still getting youtube video suggestions on my devices (phone, desktop, and laptop). Every time I opened a new tab on my phone, I was offered new suggestions based on these games. They included news articles about sales, upcoming games, youtubers, and Twitch communities. I was also receiving ads for these games on many websites I visited as well as on my yahoo mail page. The invasiveness of internet algorithms was at play (Dewey, 2015). Ads that catered to the websites I had visited and videos I had watched worked to imprison me. Video games were on my every screen. These parasitic invasions

of my space were so frequent that I started using shorter and shorter abbreviations for them in my field notes. For example, youtube ads became YT ads, and then simply YT as every time I entered YT in my field notes it was because of such ads. I also had to change how some programs operated. For example, I disabled the Steam and Discord autoload features on all my devices. I wanted to see less of these suggestions and ads. The intersection of video gaming and internet algorithms was flooding my space in a way I had not been aware of. I wanted to reclaim my space and I had to work at it to make it happen. This reclaiming was a process. Uninstalling these two games was not enough to erase them from my sight, from my life. This lengthy process comforted me in the idea of reducing and better controlling my involvement with video gaming.

During that process, I even journaled about cancelling my WoW subscription and leaving that game altogether. However, I came to see that, as a student of critical pedagogy, I had a responsibility towards my community and towards the world. Leaving a space I felt a sense of belonging to was not a critical response. As problematic as the video gaming culture is, I am attached to it. I have a place there and a possibility to do meaningful work in it. As an educator and community activist, I constantly address issues of race and white supremacy in schools. It would not occur to me to remove myself from these spaces because racism and white supremacy are present there. I see my relationship with schools and my identity as a student of critical pedagogy as a responsibility to tackle these issues. For me to leave these spaces when critical work needs to be done would go against my beliefs as a student of critical pedagogy. The communities I belong to, the relationships I have with people in these communities are meaningful and necessary to

create critical change. Moreover, seeking a community that better fosters critical principles would “contribute to the fragmentation, intolerance, and divisiveness of our world” (Shapiro, 2006, p.88). I therefore decided to continue my involvement with WoW, all the while reminding myself to keep questioning this involvement in order not to fall back into patterns of problematic play I had engaged with. In light of this decision and adopting the gadfly identity, I started making further changes to address the dichotomy in my playing and thinking about video games, my engagement with neoliberal practices of play, and my succumbing to captology:

- Limiting Recount to evaluating my performance
- Paying attention to the story and lore of *WoW* to better understand what my actions mean in that world and better understand what I may consent to. This includes reading quest texts and paying attention to NPC names.
- No longer using the LFD tool.
- Restraining myself from binge buying video games during Steam sales.
- Unsubscribing from youtube channels that trivialize oppression.
- Reducing, if not eliminating, my routine play.

While minor, these actions constituted an important element of my engagement with video games. Implementing these changes derailed my habits, as it should have. I found myself in a new time and space. The erasing of *SWL* and *LoL* took more than a simple uninstall. In fact, I found that video games had imprinted my thinking as well. For example, I read time as *LoL* units. If I had a thirty minute window in the evening I would think that I had time for 3v3 *LoL* match. If I had one hour, I would interpret that as enough time for a 5v5 *LoL* match. This was difficult to erase. There were other aspects of this lingering pull toward games I had left. During my observation period, I subbed in a



second grade class at a local elementary school. One of the students was named Taliyah. This brought a strange smile to my face. Taliyah was one of my favorite characters in *LoL*. What are the chances I would run into a person with that name as I am trying to pull away from that game? These events made me feel trapped. I would have liked for such encounters not to happen. With time away from these games, the pull has become weaker and weaker. This process is still ongoing. As I worked to weaken and cut ties with video games I could not engage with critically, I also started to enact the blueprint of my gadfly identity. I share this blueprint and initial actions next.

**The praxis of stinging: learning to arouse, persuade, and reproach.** Socrates describes the work of the gadfly as arousing, persuading, and reproaching citizens and the State. While I see connections and synergy between these concepts, I offer a distinct definition for each of these terms. These definitions helped me frame the stinging of the gadfly and therefore my actions in my community.

- Arousing is about moving people to think. The stinging provokes an intellectual and emotional stimulation. My role as gadfly involves encouraging my fellow guild and raid members to think as we play and think about what and how we play.
- Persuading is about helping people move in their thinking.
- Stinging is about provoking shifts in perceptions and worldviews.

As a gadfly, I see myself introducing my stories, because I have to expose who I am in order to teach critically (Freire, 1998), and other counter narratives to help my guildmates and raidmates examine their own thinking, rethink unexamined aspects of their play, consider connections to their lives, and come up with their own epiphanies.

Reproaching is about calling out the actions and inactions of citizens and those in power. Stinging is an intervention that aims to point out problematic behaviors that do not serve the common good. As a gadfly, I see myself calling out policies, silences, and other initiatives that work to exclude members of our community.

As a gadfly, I aim to participate in changing oppressive aspects of the video gaming culture. This work starts in my own community with the people I share a video gaming home. While arousing, persuading, and reproaching are individual actions, my goal is to have an impact on my community. I aim to speak the truth to my guildmates to create a more just and fair community for all of us. Like Socrates, I aim to show how the rules of our community work to replicate social norms by isolating and alienating minoritized players rather than creating a welcoming space for all. While this aspect of the gadfly is the most important, it is also the riskiest. I would argue that Socrates used this daring strategy because he was fighting for his life. There may be less confrontational ways to do this work, especially since being kicked/killed seriously hinders the possibilities to carry on that work. However, I am working on becoming someone who is “not afraid to confront, to listen, to see the world unveiled” (Freire, 2009, p.39). I continue to challenge my understanding of my experiences as I move forward as the gadfly. In the next section, I share examples of how I have started to reconcile my identity as a student of critical pedagogy and video game player. These actions constitute my first steps as a gadfly. These actions constitute an important step in assuming my right and duty “to opt, to decide, to struggle, to be political” (Freire, 1998,

p.53) in a space in which I used to be silent. They enable me to exist and affirm my humanity and presence in my video gaming experiences.

**Early examples of the gadfly.** I thanked Sharphammer for starting a new initiative, even if he never addressed my request regarding taking a stance against the Muslim ban. He interviewed guildmates and posted these discussions on youtube. In my message, I stressed the importance of knowing who we play with, connecting with one another as people, not only as players. My hope was to arouse Sharphammer's thinking by showing the depth of the work he was doing. My message was also an attempt at persuading him of the importance of our connections as guildmates if he was not already aware of it. I still had to be careful in treading these new waters. While I did not risk Socrates' fate, being kicked out of the raid group or guild would put an end to critical possibilities within my community. Dancing with the political line drawn by guild policies is unknown territory. This was well on my mind after I read an ambiguous Discord post about French people by Sheepysheep. He was a newer member of the team but had quickly risen to a position of leadership. I am not sure he knew I was the founder of the group. I considered these factors in whether I should respond to his post, in whether I should question and reproach his words like Socrates would and sting back. Based on my new identity, I put my finger on it and called him out. I felt empowered and validated based on his answer.

## Conclusion

I like to be human because in my unfinishedness I know that I am conditioned. Yet conscious of such conditioning. I know that I can go beyond it, which is the essential difference between conditioned and determined existence. (Freire, 1998, p.54)

I had envisioned the answer to my first research question as a still picture. I thought that my navigating the video gaming culture was going to fall into two buckets: consent and resistance. My autoethnographic journey was quite different. The documentation of my actions through my epiphanies, journal, and field notes surfaced a chasm between the two identities at the core of this project. The gap was considerable and unforeseen. The dissonance I was faced with moved me into action. As I carefully examined the cogwheels of my video gaming experiences, I realized that the watch did not work as intended. My actions did not represent who I thought I was. By breaking down experiences that had shaped me since I was a teenager, I had exposed an enchantment. In doing so, I started the endless process of breaking that spell.

Examining my play has helped me take important actions to minimize my enchanted video gaming practices. The most meaningful being the abandonment of video games for which I had few to no possibilities of doing critical work either because of a lack of community or lack of time to create such a community. Another major result of this study is the bridging of the two identities at the core of this project. The concept of the gadfly has given me a new identity and a theoretical blueprint to make sense of myself and my actions from now on. It has helped me reclaim agency within my raid team, be present in my community, and address patterns of enchanted resistance.

## On Having Power, Losing It, and Reclaiming It

*I can't tell you that in person because you are my friend and I don't want to hurt you and our relationship. I loved the team we had. But I don't recognize what you have made of it. I am going to step out for some time. I just don't know how long. Passage from the "the message I could never send you epiphany."*

From 2011 to 2014, I led the team I am now a simple member of. During that time, I shaped the group's philosophy and culture. As I gained literacy in critical pedagogy, I foregrounded community, listening, and service in my leadership role. Sometimes I did this with questionable results. Nevertheless, during the three years I held social capital because of my leadership status, I took actions, even if flawed, to forge a community, a team culture which I saw as an island of justice in the broader video gaming culture.

While there were issues with implementing these principles, I saw in my position as raid leader the legitimacy to act. I chose who made the team, who did not, what our actions would be, which strategies to use, but also which jokes were off limits, what language would be allowed... I held power in that group and was able to put into practice principles of critical pedagogy, in incomplete ways or not. After stepping down, I saw myself as powerless and without any legitimacy to talk or act. I saw myself in a new role, that of dispensable dps. I became disappointed and upset with Fluffybunny, the leader I had chosen to succeed me. These feelings came from what I had lived as the death of my raid team. I kept thinking and writing about what I would do if I had been in his shoes when confronted with casual or supposedly inoffensive racism and sexism in my team. This anger was a manifestation of my incapacity to find power and possibilities in my

new role. This failure to envision power without an official position of leadership played against my role as a student of critical pedagogy. While I had gained critical language, I had not critically examined my experiences. I had consented to a normative model of leadership which placed leaders in official positions as the source and sole holders of all power. I was no longer a leader, therefore I saw myself as holding no power. My thinking and behavior echoed that of my young self, the young Arab who did not know about the history of Algeria and felt like less of a person because of it. Gaining critical language helped me understand how hegemony, consent, and power were at play in creating the conditions to keep me ignorant, voiceless, and powerless and how agency is/can be developed through and within various vantage points. Documenting my video gaming experiences helped me see that I had fallen in the same trap. Without wording my experiences, I was ignorant of the ways in which I could exercise power from my new position in the raid team. Without wording my world, I could not understand how I had consented and silenced myself in my group and guild. Without a critical examination of my video gaming experiences, I could not imagine a new identity to reclaim and exercise power in my team. Documenting my silences and reflecting upon them made them visible in a way that I could not tolerate. My repeated silences clashed with my identity as a student of critical pedagogy. I saw my video gaming identity as cemented. As a student of critical pedagogy, I should have understood that identities shift, that we are always incomplete, and that this “incompleteness implies for us a permanent movement of search” (Freire, 1998, p.56). However, I had become immobile. I had to change something. I had to reconcile how I saw myself and how I acted. Socrates’ concept of the

gadfly provided me with such a possibility. Seeing myself as a gadfly, allowed me to envision and act as a student of critical pedagogy in my video gaming experiences. The gadfly showed me how to hold and use power from the margin. I no longer deprive myself of influence, voice, and agency. Praxis (Freire, 2009, p.79), the process of acting and reflecting on the world, here in my video gaming world, in order to change it became a possibility. While I do feel liberated and no longer caged by my silences and perceived impossibilities, I understand that liberation is a process and that I need to continue questioning my engagement with my enchantment. This study has empowered me and helped me envision a new role and a new meaning for the intersection of my identities of student of critical pedagogy and video game player. I am no longer hiding and shying away from who I am.

My review of critical pedagogy showed how becoming a student of critical pedagogy gave me a new way to make sense of my educational experiences, of education, of my world, and of myself. Through it I wrote how I was changed and empowered to act for justice. In this chapter, I made sense of my critical autoethnographic journey in video gaming in a similar manner. Answering how I navigate the video gaming culture as a student of critical pedagogy became the story of a journey. It started with understanding who I was. It led to who I am becoming. My critical inquiry into my video gaming experiences continues in the next chapter. There, I return to the concept of dismantling the clock. I share four cogwheels, four video gaming elements that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy.

## CHAPTER V

### ASSEMBLING THE CRITICAL CLOCK

#### **Introduction**

In my previous chapter, I used the concept of dismantling the clock to explain the examination of my video gaming experiences. I opened the clock that is my video gaming experiences and inspected its different components. I made sense of their complexity and contradictions to better understand how I navigated the video gaming culture as a student of critical pedagogy. I return to this concept to answer my second research question: In what ways do video games lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy? In this chapter, I strategically reassembled four cogwheels that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. Piece by piece, I put this critical clock together.

While critical learning involves spending time with oneself to contemplate, reflect, stop and think (Duarte, 2001), it also requires communication (Freire, 2009) and connection. Therefore, it is unlikely that video games will bring players to critical consciousness, self-actualization, and action on their own. A community is needed (hooks, 2010). Moreover, there is little to nothing in American culture, in that social world, that encourages and fosters critical questioning and critical thinking (Schwalbe, 2007; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). It is highly unlikely that playing games in isolation will help players connect with critical ideas. It is only when I started my doctoral



program and was introduced to critical principles that I was able to name and connect social forces that had shaped my schooling and my life and the world. Therefore, the presence of a guide, a teacher, a question nurturer alongside the player bears the most promise for drawing players into critical questioning of the world and themselves.

Without a space and community to word and examine video gaming experiences, players are not likely to reflect critically on their experiences and make connections to their lives and the world. I use the example of *Braid* (Number None, 2009) to make this case.

### Braid

*Braid* is a puzzle game with 2D platformer elements in the style of the original Mario (Nintendo, 1985). The player controls Tim and goes looking for his princess. To do so, the player guides Tim from one castle to another to find the one she is imprisoned in. That damsel-in-distress trope is deceitful as the ending of the game unveils an underlying narrative that troubles this stereotype and invites the player to ponder their experience. Other components of the game provide genre troubling elements that can invite reflection. For example, one of the main characteristics of *Braid* is that it has no game over. At any point in the game, the player can press the X button of their controller to rewind time. This command is available even after Tim dies (figure 13). When Tim is hit by a monster or falls into a pit, the player can press X to rewind time till Tim is alive and safe. They can then modify their strategy and action in order not to fail again. I connected *Braid*'s rewind mechanics to Diller's perspective of angles. Diller (1998) describes the perspective of angles as "the capacity to view issues from different, contrasting, as well as unfamiliar viewpoints" (p.4). *Braid* relies and teaches a view of

failure I had not experienced. In *Braid*, failure is part of learning and progressing through the game. The common sense understanding of failure as punishment is far from this game. *Braid* echoed Diller's perspective of angles by introducing me to a different and unfamiliar meaning of failure. I made this connection because I was familiar with critical pedagogy and Diller's theory.

Figure 13. Braid- a Puzzle Game with 2D Platformer Elements



*After Tim's death, the game informs the player that they can press X to rewind time. They have the opportunity to adopt a different strategy to defeat the enemy (screenshot by author, 2018).*

Not every player will see or be encouraged to ponder the game and its mechanics in the way I did. For example, the rapper Soulja Boy played Braid. This artist is the “youngest person to write, produce, and perform a number-one single on the Billboard Hot 100” (DX Staff, 2008) and someone who has more media exposure, social influence, and socializing power than I will ever have. Soulja Boy spoke about Braid in a video he

uploaded to youtube. He made his thoughts about the game and its rewind mechanics clear as he said laughingly: “there ain’t no point to the game” (Chafenhimer, 2009). Diller (1998) writes that without the assistance or intervention of “someone who can introduce students to broader perspectives or demonstrate shifts they might make to new angles of vision, most students will find it difficult to engage in non-conventional reflections on their own education.” (p.6). While Diller writes about students, her point is relevant to video game players as well. Because the presence of a “critical someone” is needed, I envision the four cogwheels I share in this chapter to be used alongside a flesh and bone educator who will arouse students’ thinking. As an educator myself, I see in the classroom the most meaningful space to do this work and implement my findings. To account for the classroom context in which these elements are to be experienced and analyzed, I use the term player/student to refer to the people who are to play/study the games I use as examples.

### **Identifying the Four Cogwheels**

In analyzing my data, I have surfaced an important aspect of my play that is directly tied to identifying critical elements of the game I play. This aspect of my play is a meaningful overlap between my identities as an avid video game player and student of critical pedagogy. I have identified that as I play, I aim to make sense of the choices the developers have made in terms of game design. I ask myself questions such as why did the developers want their game to look that way, why did they choose that particular music or instrument, why did they implement a silence there, why does the story arc that way... I question the intentionality behind the game I play and how the elements of the

game translate this intentionality. I name this aspect of my play “playing like a critical game designer.” I derive that term from the more common term of “reading like a writer” (Bunn, 2011, p.71). There are two most pertinent characteristics of “reading like a writer” that apply to “playing like a critical game designer.” The first is to question the author’s purpose for creating this piece. The second is:

to locate what you believe are the most important writerly choices represented in the text—choices as large as the overall structure or as small as a single word used only once—to consider the effect of those choices on potential readers (including yourself). Then you can go one step further and imagine what different choices the author might have made instead, and what effect those different choices would have on readers (Bunn, 2011, p.72).

I ask myself similar questions as I play such as the reasons behind the creation of the game I play, the meaning of the game designers’ choices, the potential reactions of players (including myself) when they experience various elements of the game, and potential alternatives to these choices. If I played video games that did not center social commentary I would wonder how the elements implemented in the game could be adapted to a socially engaged game. In other words, when I play I seek to understand the relationship between the why and the how. I ask myself why the designers created that game and how this purpose translates into the game. This process was at play in my experiences no matter the games I played, however it used to be heightened for the games that foregrounded social critique. I identified four cogwheels that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy through the naming and studying of this process. They are procedural rhetoric, transgression, introducing critical language, and breaking all walls. I start by offering a definition for each cogwheel. I then give an example of a video game

that showcases how this cogwheel works. Some of these cogwheels are present in video games that are directly tied to social critique. In these cases, these examples fit the critical classroom like a glove. In other cases, the cogwheels are present in video games that are not directly tied to social critique. In these cases, I show that these cogwheels bear the promise of criticality. My work on criticality and video games can therefore be used in two ways. In the case of cogwheels used in video games that lend themselves directly to the classroom, my research shows how these games could smoothly become part of the critical curriculum for such classes. In the case of cogwheels that are not present in video games that foreground social commentary, my work shows how these cogwheels could be leveraged for creating moments that challenge players/students' assumptions and prejudice in future games. Such challenges to players/students' thinking constitute an important step in moving from naïve consciousness to critical consciousness (Freire, 1998). In this case, my findings can be most helpful to video game designers who want to create games that make their players question their own thinking.

### **Procedural Rhetoric**

As a scholar and game designer, Bogost (2007) developed the idea that video games make claims through procedural rhetoric. He defines procedural rhetoric as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures” (p. IX). Procedural rhetoric is a unique tool for video games to make claims. What is possible for the player within games corresponds to a specific vision and a particular message of the game developer for the player. Through this tool, video game designers can frame video games to implement

specific experiences and ways of being in the world. This component is aligned with critical pedagogy in two ways. First, it creates a space for minoritized and silenced experiences to be represented through game rules. Second, it allows for oppressive systems to be made visible in society by translating them into game rules and mechanics. The example I use illustrates the former point. I show how the rules and mechanics of No Pineapple Left Behind (Subaltern Games, 2016) make the rampant influence of neoliberalism in schools visible.

**Exposing neoliberalism through No Pineapple Left Behind’s procedural rhetoric.** No Pineapple Left Behind (NPLB) is a resource management game. Players/students take on the role of a school principal. As such, players/students have a starting budget and must make financial choices such as who to hire and fire in order to achieve goals specific to each level. I focus on the first two levels. Each level takes place in a specific school. The first school players/students oversee is the Midvale school for the gifted located in the fictional city of New Bellona. The stated objective of that level is to “learn to be an effective administrator.” In the game, that translates to getting acquainted with the different units available to the player/student namely children, pineapples, and teachers (figure 14). The second level focuses on the Ananas Pleito school. There, players/students learn the basic mechanics of making money through schools.

**Level 1: an introduction to units.** This level functions as a tutorial. Through it, players/students are taught the specifics of each unit. I breakdown down the mechanics of each unit below.

The Tutorial teaches us that children:

- “are complicated” which means that they possess quests and traits such as ‘crush,’ ‘dating,’ ‘rejected,’ or ‘frenemies’ which modify their behavior and distract them from getting good grades.
- Have a grade score and a humanity score.
- Turn to pineapples when they reach 0 humanity.

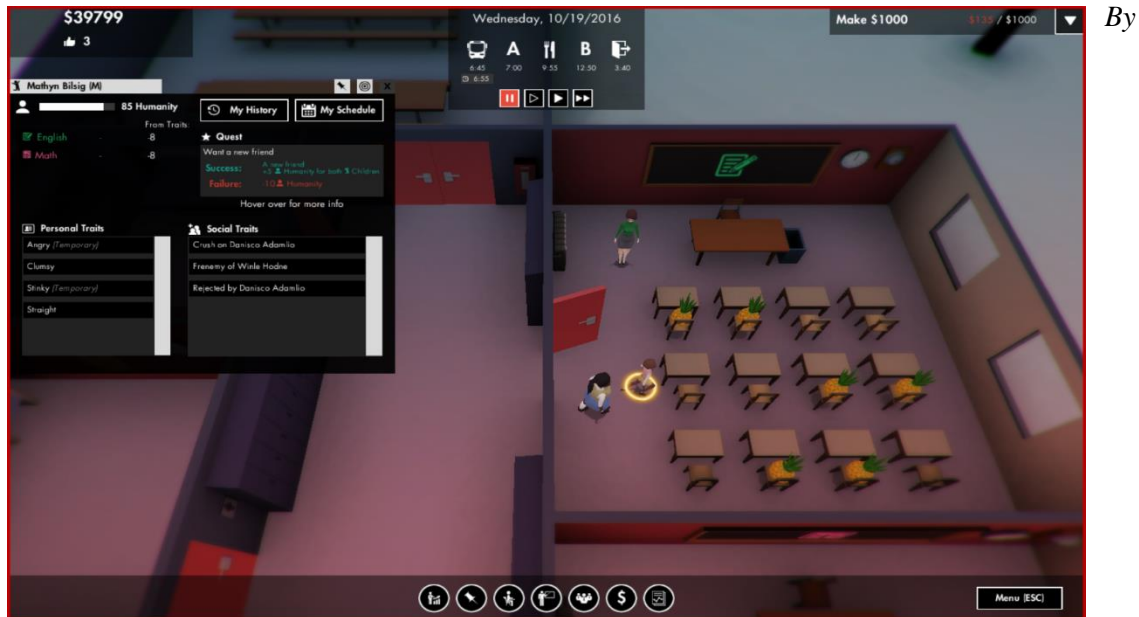
The Tutorial teaches us that Pineapples:

- Do not have names, they have numbers.
- Take tests and get grades.
- Have a grade score and a humanity score.
- Turn into children when they reach 100 humanity.

The Tutorial teaches us that teachers’:

- Lesson plans correspond to spells.
- Spells affect student grades and humanity. For example, the “Memorization” spell brings grades up by 6 and lowers humanity by 6.
- Spell success depends on teachers’ energy. Energy is affected by fatigue and salary.

Figure 14. No Pineapple Left Behind



*Clicking Mathyn Bilsig the layer/student accesses that student's information window. With a humanity of 85, Mathyn can sustain several spells before turning into a pineapple (screenshot by author, 2018).*

**Level 2: an introduction to game mechanics.** The second level focuses on the mechanics of the game by introducing the following goal: do not lose money for two consecutive days. This level teaches players/students a basic strategy for making money. That strategy consists of hiring teachers at the beginning of the day and emptying them of their energy by casting spells and raising student scores throughout that day. Once they can't cast any more spells, that is they are unable to raise student scores, the player/student can fire them. Repeating that strategy the next day ensures no teachers are paid a salary, therefore maximizing profits and fulfilling that level's goal of not losing any money.



**NPLB claims.** I share here some of the most pertinent procedural claims made by NPLB:

- The goal of the game/education is to turn in a profit.
- Learning is an act that is initiated by the teachers and received by students.
- Students' only function is to score high grades for the purpose of increasing school revenue.
- Students' desires and issues constitute burdens toward making money. They must be ignored.
- Teachers are a disposable workforce.

The game is built so that players/students have to conform to these rules and views to be successful. NPLB's procedural rhetoric brings to the surface a view of education that, in many ways, goes against principles of critical pedagogy. By playing/studying NPLB in the critical classroom, players/students can gain an understanding of neoliberalism, its impact on schools, and on their own schooling. It can help them see under the hood of education and better understand how laws of the market can impact education and other social institutions. Procedural rhetoric can bring social systems, just or not, to the surface and to consciousness. Playing/studying such games in the critical classroom can help students gain an understanding of systems at play in education and in the world for the purpose of changing them when they are unjust.

### **Transgression**

This element refers to the deliberate transgression of a video game genre, atmosphere, or style, for the purpose of triggering a moment of reflection, surprise, and/or discomfort. Diller (1998) writes about these moments as "moments of stuckness"

(p.1). She explains that these moments lead to the examination or re-examination of one's knowledge and oneself. I connect these moments to Shapiro's memory of the Shofar, a ram's horn, blown during the celebration of Rosh Hashanah. He writes that "it produces a sound like no other, at once a plaintive cry and a shrill demand for alert attention" (2006, p.190). He continues and explains that as a child, this sound "represented a kind of wild and primitive eruption in the ordered drone of the prayer service during the holy days of the Jewish New Year. (...) Its sound was intended to shake us out of the habitual routines of our existence in which our actions and behaviors lacked adequate moral and existential consideration" (p.190). Poulos (2012) describes these moments as:

moments in a life when something—an insight, an epiphany, an image, a sign, a trauma, a loss, or even a shadow or an insult or a transgression (real or perceived)—seems to just "break through" into the ordinary flow of everyday life—out of nowhere, so to speak. A vision, a dream, a metaphor, a conversation, a significant person, a hint, a sign, a clue, a memory, or a sacred/spiritual experience . . . just sort of "shows up." And a crisis (split/separation) is born! Something . . . bursts into consciousness and grips our awareness (p.323)

These moments are signs that our world is breaking down and that we need to rebuild it, to make sense of it in a new way. Such moments lend themselves to critical pedagogy because they open a space for reflection. They trigger self-actualization. Video games can transgress and offer the possibility for such moments to occur in several ways. In this section, I detail two ways transgression has operated through my play and how it made me question my own thinking.

**Transgressing genre rules and conventions.** *Doki Doki Literature Club* (Team Salvato, 2017) is a visual novel developed by Team Salvato. Visual novels are games that

resemble “choose your own adventure books” (Lebowitz & Klug, 2011, p.194).

Players/students are presented with multiple choice answers. Their choices matter as the story forks onto different paths depending on these answers. In *Doki Doki Literature Club* (DDLC), the player takes control of a male high school student who is invited to join a poetry club led by Monika, another student. As seen on the game’s website (*Doki Doki Literature Club*, 2017), many aspects of the game led me to think that I was playing a romance simulator:

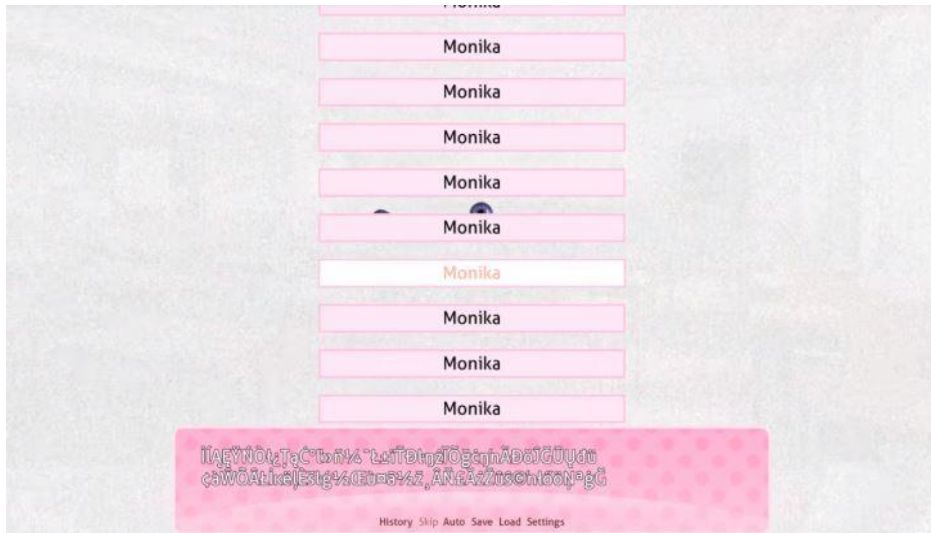
I'm super excited for you to make friends with everyone and help the Literature Club become a more intimate place for all my members. But I can tell already that you're a sweetheart—will you promise to spend the most time with me? ♥

However, the game takes a dark twist and the promise of romance turns into a horror trap. The game transgresses its own conventions and genre through several means. While the narrative and questioning surrounding these elements do not lend itself to critical pedagogy, reading these moments through the lens of a critical game designer gave me insights on how to adapt the underlying mechanics of transgression to create moments of stuckness in other games. I describe this potential next.

**The forced choice.** An important element of the visual novel genre relies on offering multiple choices to their players. One of the many choices the player/student is offered in *DDLC* is who they wish to share their poems with. As the game progresses, Monika turns into a power hungry character who takes over the game. She hacks the game and the choices offered to the players. Throughout the game, I had been taught to pick one answer out of multiple choices. Monika’s takeover transgressed that rule. For

example, I was about to be prompted for whom to share my poem with when Monika changed all the answers to her name and bugged the question so that it did not show in an intelligible language (figure 15).

Figure 15. A Troubling Consequence of Monika's Game Hacking (Joshiball, 2017)



DDLC uses other means to transgress its own norms. It also uses animations and graphics. During my first playthrough, the game seemingly and abruptly ended with Sayori, the main character's best friend, hanging herself. The ending sequence led me back to the main screen. I expected to see the main screen I had seen when I first played the game. However, a graphically bugged version of Monika stood in the space initially occupied by Sayori (figure 16).

Figure 16. On the Left, a Seemingly Bugged Version of Monika Stands in Sayori's Place (Joshiball, 2017).



As I loaded my game to continue playing, the narrative was eerily the same as during the first playthrough however there was no mention of Sayori or her existence. As I progressed, the game continued “bugging.” There were glitches in animations and visuals. It seemed as if it was corrupted or about to crash. A quick google search to make sure my computer was not faulty led me to player posts which shared that this “bugging” was an actual part of the game. I struggled to make sense of that. I knew something was at play but I was not sure what. Finding the reasons behind the appearance of bugs and disappearance of Sayori became my main reasons to continue playing the game.

The hijacking of multiple choice answers is a transgression of the genre. A moment that disrupted the narrative and the possibilities offered to me. The bugs further contributed to this transgression. I saw in these moments a cogwheel that could work to orient the possibilities of players/students toward unexpected and unexamined paths.

What if Monika was the social world and her influence worked to narrow or influence the life possibilities of characters based on their social markers such as gender, race, ability...? I started envisioning a game which would work as a textbook. This is one of the ways through which I make sense of my play, asking how elements of video games that send me into moments of stuckness could lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy.

Transgression can take many forms in video games. *DDLC* transgresses its own genre by presenting false multiple choices. It also transgresses its visual style by using pixelated bugs. Other transgressive tools are available. *The Surge* (Deck 13, 2017) transgressed its own futuristic theme with an acoustic song, *ActRaiser* (Quintet Co., Ltd, 1990) transgressed its promise to make the main character a God by presenting an ending in which all believers abandoned the deity. Visuals, sounds, and narratives can play roles in creating transgressive moments for the players/students. These moments lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. Transgressions introduce dissonance and contradictions. They create or expose a gap in a narrative and invite players/students to make meaning of it. Cowhey (2006) writes about the essential role of contradictions in teaching students to think critically. She explains that “whether in history or current events, contradictions are opportunities to ask larger and deeper questions” (p.158). I do find the term transgression more fitting than contradiction to this element because transgression implies a high degree of intentionality. Transgression is a design choice. The transgressions in *DDLC* invited me to ask questions about the metanarrative of the game. This element shows critical promise. Implementing transgressions in socially

engaged video games could invite players/students to engage with larger and deeper questions about the social world and society.

### **Introducing Critical Language**

Language is not neutral. It is a representation of a specific view of the world (Nieto, 2011; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017). I had no words at the end of 12th grade to connect the absence of the Algerian War of Independence to questions of power and imperialism. Without them, I blamed myself for my ignorance. Gaining literacy in critical pedagogy helped me understand the impact of power and imperialism in keeping such knowledge out of schools and out of my hands. Thanks to critical pedagogy, I considered historical and social contexts to make sense of that experience. Introducing critical language in video games can help players/students gain literacy in critical pedagogy. Such vocabulary and ideas can give the critical teacher a basis to help players/students questions their assumptions, their education, and the world. Video games can introduce critical language to players/students in several ways.

#### **Introducing critical language through quest text in the secret world legends.**

*As I was exploring Marquard's basement, I hacked a computer and ran into this sentence: "What are names but a way of shaping reality." It was weaved around the names of fantastic creatures Marquard was studying. Journal entry, Saturday April 14th.*

"Into the fold" is a *Secret World Legends* (Funcom, 2017) mission which requires the player/student to infiltrate the mansion of a South African cult leader, Philip Marquard. In the basement, which is also used as a prison and lab, I accessed a computer

containing information about gruesome experiments. One of the memos (figure 17) included the following line: “What are names but a way of shaping reality?”

Figure 17. A Memo Including Reflections on Creating Monsters from Local Animals (69quato 2018)



This sentence points at the critical idea that language is a mark of the cultural, political, and social interpretation of the world (hooks, 2010). The scientist who was stitching animals together knew that the locals would make sense of his creatures through the lens of their myths and culture. By identifying them as such, the local population would also grant these creatures all the traits associated with the creatures they knew as kishi and gagorib hence the “glamour and majesty of horror.” However, this text was rather lost in the middle of a mission. There was not much else in this mission that tapped into the power of that sentence. A larger statement about language and reality could have



been made. That sentence was not anchored in a sustained message. A game that would specifically be aimed at teaching critical pedagogy could sustain that message.

Nevertheless, the *Secret World Legends* (SWL) used other means to include scholar language and powerful ideas. For example, while venturing Tokyo, I encountered a boy named Jung on an empty playground (figure 18). Approaching him launched a cut scene and started a mission entitled “The Shadow.”

Figure 18, A Boy Named Jung on an Empty Playground



*Jung is a boy with psychic abilities. He introduces himself by reading the main character's mind and answering their question before they are verbalized (Leniaret, 2016).*

By speaking to Jung, I learned that the boy earned this nickname because of his “propensity in quoting the famous psychologist’s thoughts on the topic of the collective unconscious.” Jung is indeed named after Carl Jung, a famed psychologist. “The Shadow” (Jung, 1973) is one of Carl Jung’s theories. My point here is not to find out whether or not the game did a good job with implementing Jung’s theory, the game may

or may not have succeeded in that endeavor. What I want to show is that there is a possibility in video games to introduce critical principles to players/students. This cogwheel is most helpful to video game designers, especially those who foreground social issues in their design. They could leverage this cogwheel in two ways. The first is by introducing critical ideas and naming them as such. The “What are names but a way of shaping reality?” sentence works to introduce players/students to language as a way to shape reality and understanding (Moore, 1976). And as Kincheloe (2008) writes, “The curriculum of critical pedagogy “names names”” (p.35). Giving our players/students vocabulary to materialize and crystallize concepts is an important element of teaching and learning. Critical language would unveil a new lens for them to make sense of their thinking, of their identity, and of the world. These concepts could be weaved into quest text as done in the “Into the fold” mission. They would however need to be reinforced and positioned as a central message or else run the risk of being overlooked and lost by the player/student.

Another way critical language can be introduced to players/students is by using characters such as Jung in “The Shadow” mission. Introducing Paulo Freire, bell hooks, or Duncan-Andrade as mission givers may be problematic, but creating representation of ideas as mission givers could work to introduce critical pedagogues or principles of critical pedagogy in the language and design of a critical game. The creators of SWL did not plug Carl Jung in their game. Instead, they used a boy with psychic powers to represent Jung and his ideas through a cut scene. I can envision how a video game set in an apocalyptic future might take players/students to a library where holograms of various

authors might speak directly to them and give them options on how to heal their now desolated world.

### **Breaking All Walls**

Breaking all walls is about linking the player to actual people by relying on first accounts. I derive this element from the concept of the fourth wall. The idea of breaking the fourth wall has been used in theater, movies, books, and video games. Conway (2009) writes that the fourth wall works as “the demarcation between stage and audience, the wall of the cinema screen, the television set, it was the barrier that allowed us to see into another world without becoming part of it” (para. 2). In theater, where this term emerged, the fourth wall signals to the audience that the performance is detached from them, that it is not real. Breaking the fourth wall happens when a character addresses the audience or faces the camera, therefore acknowledging the audience and their own existence as a character and not a person. Breaking the fourth wall can be used to produce various effects such as to create a moment of comedy or emphasis. In video games, breaking the fourth wall has been done through several means such as splattering blood on the screen in some of Total War: Shogun 2 - Blood Pack’s fights (The Creative Assembly, 2011). The blood hitting the screen signals that there actually is a screen. It stresses the separation between the player and the game. As Conway stresses though, rather than reinforcing the idea of detachment between the two, such uses of the fourth wall in video games tend to heighten player engagement. They work to bring the player onto the stage rather than to push them further out. By breaking all walls, I signal that rather than a performance or experience detached from the “real world” video games, when they rely

on first accounts, can link players/students to actual people. Breaking all walls can work to connect players/students to social issues. Through this cogwheel, video games invite students into experiences that may be removed from their own. I am not stating that players/students who play games built on first accounts can claim to know how it feels to be in the shoes of person(s) the game is based on. However, these experiences, as incomplete as they can be, could be used by the critical teacher to spearhead reflections and questioning. Such games can introduce players to historical accounts and minoritized stories that have been silenced. Seeing multiple perspectives is an essential component of critical thinking (Cowhey, 2006; hooks, 2000). It also serves to teach players/students to seek multiple accounts on a single event or topic (Cowhey, 2006). I share one such minoritized narrative in my next example. Through it, I show the potential of this cogwheel in making the stage disappear and how video games can invite players to ponder social issues.

**Minoritized narratives of war in *This War of Mine*.** *This War of Mine* (11bit Studios, 2014) is a survival strategy game. The game's website describes the overall premise through this sentence: "In *This War of Mine* for the first time **you do not play as an elite soldier, but a group of civilians** trying to survive in a besieged city; struggling with lack of necessities and constant danger" (This War of Mine Description, 2014). Players/students control a group of people who have been thrown together by war. Their only purpose is to survive (figure 19). Game developers researched first accounts of war survivors who were not soldiers to build their game. Pawel Miechowski, senior writer at 11bit studio, speaks of his team's work when he (Preston, 2015) states that:

we did the research – we were looking for memoirs and stories from people who survived different wars, and within these memoirs and interviews we searched for particular events that stuck in the person’s mind, using these to understand how civilians perceived war. (para. 3)

In that interview, he explains that the sieges of Sarajevo and Warsaw were “the most important inspirations” in designing this game (para. 3). In addition to documents telling the stories of survivors, they also used their family stories. Miechowski and his co-workers implemented their grandparents’ survival stories during the Nazi and Soviet invasions of Warsaw.

Figure 19. This War of Mine – a Survival Strategy Game



*As characters scavenge for food, medicine, and materials at night, they also reminisce about life before war. Pavle used to attend this Church with his parents. Tonight’s visit is about survival (screenshot by author).*

By breaking all walls, *This War of Mine* invites players to reconsider war as honorable and necessary by relying on the stories of war survivors. The choices

players/students are asked to make are drawn from these accounts. I document one of these drastic choices in one of my epiphanies. I had sent Pavle, one of the civilians I controlled, to a dangerous neighborhood to scavenge food for our group and find medicine for Bruno who was sick. I lost Pavle on that run. He was killed by snipers, leaving the rest of the group starving and Bruno ailing. The next night, I decided to send Katia after an easy target she had visited a few nights ago. There, she broke into the home of an elderly couple. The husband had begged her (and therefore me) not to take anything. He pleaded and stated that he and his wife were weak and old. He implored Katia not to take the medicine because his wife was sick. I had felt terrible and had left the house without taking anything. After Pavle's death, I could not risk sending another group member to their death or come back empty handed. I sent Katia back to the house of the elderly people. I took what I needed while the powerless husband kept begging and begging. Here is the passage I wrote after Katia came back from her scavenging.

*Bruno has his pills now. Today might not be the day he dies. He swallows his pills and rolls over. Katia is still in the entrance. She has not moved from that cold gray room. Her eyes are open but she sees nothing. Her backpack drops to the floor. So does her mask. The scenes are coming back. Everything is imprinted in her memory. The voice of the old man echoes in her head. She knows what she did. She picked the weakest people. She chose those who couldn't fight back. Katia, a few months ago a reporter, someone who wanted to do good, is now preying, stealing, feeding on the weak. The weight of her own shame and inhumanity brings her knees to the ground. "Is this really me? Did I really do this? Is this the price to pay to survive? War took Pavle. I think I killed this old couple. How much of me is still alive? How much of me will survive?" (passage from the "This war of mine" epiphany)*

Knowing that these stories were anchored in people's experiences and survival opened me up to realities of war I had never foreseen. These first accounts forced me to

make ethical choices for which I found no acceptable solutions. I found it difficult to play a game in which no option corresponded to my morals. Had the game not been based on first accounts, I would have most likely stopped playing it and dismissed the game as not for me. However, knowing that these choices were based on actual first accounts made me ponder. Turning off the game because I was presented a choice I did not enjoy bore a drastic contrast with those who had to make these choices when stranded by war. There was no game to exit for them. These first accounts helped me think beyond the screen. The game introduces more complexity by including multiple characters and therefore multiple minoritized perspectives on war. By playing/studying this game, players/students can get into minoritized narratives of war that contrast with the American view of war as glorious and honorable. These video gaming experiences are only a reflection of the first accounts the game is based on. While players/students face drastic choices, the option of turning the game off is always present. The hunger and feelings of fears and despair experienced by civilians stranded by war is hardly replicable in video games. So, while player choices have an impact on the game, I see these choices and the moments of stuckness they may create as starting points for thinking about our ignorance of war rather than first hand claims about war and survival. It is still possible to educate ourselves on the meanings and contexts of war, but playing the game offers a good start rather than an ending point in that process. The critical teacher can use this starting point to offer opportunities for educating players/students on these experiences. The concepts of honor, self-sacrifice, and patriotism portrayed in American culture are far and distant from the stories of *This War of Mine*. This game is about humanity and

the struggles of civilians to cling to it in war zones. By connecting players/students to social issues through the lives of actual people, by breaking all the walls of the stage, critical teachers can invite player/students to think beyond pixels and expose hegemony, expose their own limited thinking. Through its use of first accounts, *This War of Mine* has shown me that my thinking about war was limited. The game has opened a space for me to consider my ignorance about war and civilians. Through the support of additional materials, the critical teacher can help students link *This War of Mine* and other video games they play to other stories, other people, and other topics. For example, juxtaposing an analysis of ROTC and its socializing messages next to the counter narratives of *This War of Mine* can open a discussion in which critical questions can be pondered. Discussing questions such as ‘who benefits from the messages surrounding ROTC?’ and ‘who is hurt by these same messages?’ and then answering the same questions about the messages of *This War of Mine* can help players/students understand war and this country with more complexity. Another powerful analysis would be to compare *This War of Mine* to other video games that glorify war such as the popular *Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2003)*.

I have shown how procedural rhetoric, transgression, the inclusion of critical language, and breaking all walls lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. All these elements can be used in the critical classroom to bring players/students’ attention to social systems, hegemony, critical ideas, and counter narratives. However, an additional element needs to be accounted for when assessing whether a game can be used in the critical classroom or designing a critical game to be used in such a classroom. While the



four elements I present in my findings are essential, there is an additional component not tied to critical pedagogy that must be accounted for: engagement. Without engagement, there is no guarantee that video games will draw in players/students. The four components I identified in my research work as cogwheels. They are inherent elements of the clock that work as critical components. They can work together in a video game to trigger moments of stuckness and force players/students to rethink their assumptions. Engagement however is different. Engagement can serve critical purposes, but it can also be used to foster behaviors and ways of thinking that go contrary to critical pedagogy. For example, using extrinsic rewards in schools as an engagement tool can push students to do work no matter what that work is, be it debilitating worksheets or writing a collective poem based on a student group's understanding of photosynthesis. Therefore, engagement does not qualify as a critical principle. It does not work as a cogwheel, but as something different. Video games that tackle critical pedagogy must work as engaging games that draw their players in. Their critical aspect does not mean that they can sacrifice engaging gameplay. If players/students are not drawn into the game, they will not be able to access its critical message. For the game to work, engagement needs to be present. For the critical clock to operate smoothly, the cogwheels must be oiled. In the next section, I discuss the theory of flow, a non-critical element that focuses on engagement. Without it, players/students may find the messages of the games they play hardly accessible or too dry.

### **Oil in the Machinery: on the Necessity and Limits of Flow**

Flow is the “extreme neurochemical activation that happens in our brains and bodies when we start to play a good computer game or video game” (McGonigal, 2011, p.40). It involves “being focused, highly motivated, creatively charged, and working at the very limits” of our abilities (McGonigal, 2011, p.40). Flow is experienced by gamers when their engagement is at its peak. One of the consequences of flow is that players lose themselves in the game through immersion and engagement. Flow is not restricted to video games. Other activities such as sports or even work can produce flow. However, video games can produce flow much faster which makes them more favorable than other media (McGonigal, 2011). I use a video game example to illustrate how flow functions. I then critique flow to show that it is detached from criticality. Flow indeed works to heighten player engagement no matter the messages of a video game, harmful or just. Therefore, critical educators must be mindful of it.

**Example: Night of the Living Debt.** Night of the Living Debt is an app developed by New Mexico State University Media Productions (2016) available to Apple users through the App store. The game is designed for “high schoolers, it is also suitable for youth or adults interested in learning about credit issues and debt” (Night of the Living Debt, 2016). The purpose of the game is for players/students to learn how to manage their credit. Players/students navigate the game by collecting supplies that can be traded for cash. With that cash, they can pay their rent. At the end of the day their character goes to sleep. The next day, they can once again collect supplies and trade them for cash. The cycle repeats itself. After the player/student has understood the basic

mechanics of the game, a message appears informing them that they should now aim to buy a car, get an education, and purchase a larger house. They must up their credit score to reach these new goals. The interface informs them that they can do so by using their credit card strategically and paying off their credit card debt as soon as possible.

Players/students are given ten nights to accomplish these goals. The game becomes a race against time to build a manageable debt and paying it off before being charged interest (figure 20).

*Night of the Living Debt (NOLTD)* is set in a post-apocalyptic atmosphere in which all vendors are zombies (the car salesman, the insurance vendor, the supplies buyer, and the different debt collectors). At the end of each credit card cycle (every two nights), a debt zombie appears to collect its due. Through a third person view, the player can touch the screen and slide money from their different money pools to pay the zombie. These money pools are cash, savings, credit card, and payday loan. A credit score meter is located at the bottom right of the screen. It is adjusted according to the player's choices. For example, paying off a debt zombie brings the credit score up. Taking a payday loan brings that score down. A high credit score unlocks access to higher education and more onerous cars and homes. The graphic interface is engaging and fun. The cartoonish style allows for a humorous take on the zombie theme.

Figure 20. Night of the Living Debt



*Failing on the 10th night with an abysmal credit score grants the player/student the title of “another victim of the living debt” (screenshot by author, 2017).*

The game is aligned with the theory of flow because it is engaging. Its structure slowly introduces basic mechanics of the game during the first two nights. On the third night, the main goal of the game is unveiled: getting the education, the car, and the home within ten nights. Offering a timed challenge adds to the excitement. The player/student is on a mission and choices matter. All of the tools are present for players to feel a sense of agency and urgency. The game offers all the ingredients for a quick immersion in this zombified world. Successful player decisions can bring them a sense of fulfillment and happiness. Everything is there for them to experience flow.

**The limits of Flow.** Flow is useful in creating engaging and immersive video games. *NOTLD* teaches players that in order to obtain the things they want in life they have to master and tame their credit score. This knowledge and these skills are indeed deeply needed. Bankruptcies have constantly and steadily increased over the last century (Krulick, 2012). This game constitutes a noble effort in addressing this issue. However, *NOTLD* does not raise critical questions about the concepts of credit and debt. It does not ask questions such as who created that system, for whose benefit, who does this system hurt, and what alternatives are possible. By turning a blind eye to issues of power the game perpetuates the dangerous idea that credit and debt are a natural part of our society, that it is up to individuals to navigate these concepts, and that their only option is to play the credit card game. Flow works no matter the messages of a game. Csikszentmihalyi, one of the proponents of flow argued “that the failure of schools, offices, factories, and other everyday environments to provide flow was a serious moral issue, one of the most urgent problems facing humanity” (as cited in McGonigal, 2011, p.36). Some advocates of flow see in video gaming an opportunity to bring flow in classrooms and make schooling engaging. Because they identify engagement and fun as the main issues tied to poor schooling results, their answer is to implement flow in schools. Their message does not address issues tied to critical principles such as whose knowledge is taught in schools, whose knowledge is devalued, who benefits from the current system, and who is hurt by it. The theory of flow does not address them. It does not look for them. Therefore, while flow plays an essential role in engaging players/students, it does not make the cut as a critical cogwheel. Flow alone does not guarantee that a video game addresses societal

issues. However, video games that do not consider flow are likely to create a clunky experience and may turn off players/students. Both need to be present.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I identified four video gaming cogwheels that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. I have drawn these elements from the critical analysis of my experiences, especially the “playing like a critical game designer” process I engage in when I play. I have assembled these elements in this chapter to outline possibilities for teaching critical pedagogy through video gaming. I advocate for the use of these cogwheels in a communal space. As an educator, I see that space as the classroom. Outside of the classroom these video gaming elements can still spark questioning but it is highly unlikely they will bloom into critical consciousness without someone who has the knowledge to push players into questioning their experiences, if players’/students’ capacity to question has never been nurtured.

Each of the four cogwheels has its own purpose. Procedural rhetoric can bring social systems to the surface. Transgression can create pivotal moments and dissonance in their players’ thinking through visuals, animations, and sound. The use of critical language can help players/students name critical ideas and therefore recognize them in games, and with practice, outside of games as well. Breaking all walls invites players to contemplate their ignorance and consider the experiences of minoritized people. This element connects a game’s message to realities beyond the screen. These four elements provide a basis through which to teach critical pedagogy through video gaming. They can also help the critical teacher identify these cogwheels in the games they play. This list is

an *unfinished* project in the Freirean sense of the term. It is not exhaustive. These findings were compiled through the critical analysis of my lived video gaming experiences. While my data was quite large, other players with different identities and experiences could identify other such cogwheels. However, as a long-standing member of the video gaming community who has gone through a vigorous documenting and questioning of his experiences, I have shown that this list is comprehensive and a useful piece in the discussion on video gaming and education.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Through this dissertation I have engaged in a robust autoethnographic study to answer the following questions:

1. How do I navigate the video gaming cultures as a student of critical pedagogy?
2. In what ways do video games lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy?

This ongoing process opened a space in which I documented and questioned my experiences methodically and thoroughly. I used the concepts of enchantment and dismantling the clock to make sense of my work and findings. I examined the underlying mechanics of an aspect of my life that was magical and unexamined. By writing, I crystallized my video gaming experiences and turned something magical and intangible into something mechanical, visible, and understandable. I unveiled the complexities behind the joys and wonders of a medium, hobby, and passion that had been part of my life for over thirty years.

#### **Summary of Findings**

I surfaced a gap between my identities as a student of critical pedagogy and video game player. I exposed my enchantment. I could not unsee what I was writing. The dichotomy I had created between the games I played and those I critiqued, the neoliberal



forms of play I engaged in, my succumbing to captology, and the ways in which I behaved like an alien in my own community were hidden by the enchantment. The powerful memories and emotions tied to video gaming worked to conceal this rift. In deconstructing my enchantment, I started the never-ending process of breaking it. I exposed its blinding power and what it had blinded me to. Through what Bochner (2000) describes “as a tale of two selves” (p.270), I addressed this chasm and worked on reconciling the two identities at the core of this study. The metaphor of the gadfly gave me a theory to make sense of a new identity at the intersection of critical pedagogy and video gaming. Seeing myself as a gadfly has allowed me to become present in my video gaming community and to regain power and agency within that community to do meaningful critical work. I became an agent of change that aims to sting its community into consciousness and action.

Through this critical autoethnographic process, I also identified another important aspect of my play: thinking like a critical game designer. When I play, I pay particular attention to the messages the game designers aim to convey in their games and what tools they use to convey these messages. I compiled a list of four cogwheels, four video gaming elements that lend themselves to the teaching of critical pedagogy. I shared that procedural rhetoric can be used to make invisible social systems visible, that we can use this procedural rhetoric “as a new way to interrogate our world, to comment on it, to disrupt and challenge it” (Bogost, 2007, p.340). I showed how the concept of transgression can lead players/students to critical moments of stuckness through which they can examine their assumptions. I explained how including critical language in games

can give players/students access to vocabulary and ideas that reinforce player/student critical literacy. I added that breaking all walls by including multiple first accounts on a same topic can introduce or foster complexity in players/students' thinking. I stressed the importance of a community to use video games in teaching critical pedagogy. I explained that, as an educator, I make sense of that community as the classroom.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

My research suggests further study for two main branches. The first is continuing to critically study the ways in which players who see themselves as agents of change in and/or out of the video gaming culture enact that identity in their experiences. This includes but is not limited to studying how players resist oppression within the games they play and within the communities they play with. I insist on the critical study of these topics since people who play games are likely to do so for entertainment and, therefore, their play and/or resistance is likely to be enchanted, that is unexamined and therefore naïve. Examining my play and resistance has helped me gain a better understanding of my play, my resistance, and myself. Such a study was necessary for me to better do what I thought I was doing, to better act as who I aim to be.

The second branch my research suggests is to continue studying the use and impact of video games in nurturing critical principles in players. As an educator and video game player, it is in this branch that I plan on dedicating the core of my research. I aim to create curriculum to help players/students question their assumptions and see the world with complexity. I envision the implementation of these cogwheels through two possible means. The first is to create a pool of existing video games to serve as texts for

students. For example, as a teacher of future teachers, I see myself using NPLB in the classroom to help students reframe their education through the lens of neoliberalism and the banking system. By asking students to make connections between their experience in public schools and the procedural rhetoric of NPLB, I aim to bring oppressive systems of schooling to the surface. By reframing students' experiences with schooling, I aim to plant the seeds of dissent in their future teaching. I plan on assessing my students' understanding of the banking system and neoliberalism in education by using post video gaming surveys. These surveys will prompt students for qualitative data through questions such as: how do students show they learn in the banking system? what kind of society does the neoliberal model of schooling foster? The second possibility for my research is to partner with independent video game makers to design critical video games. Such games would draw on the four cogwheels I identified in this study to create moments of stuckness for their players/students. Because of my background and personal ties to the immigrant and refugee communities, I see myself relying on first accounts of members of that community to design my first video games. Video games like *This War of Mine* (11bit Studio, 2014) and *Soldats Inconnus: Mémoires de la grande guerre* (Ubisoft, 2014) provide good templates for the creation of video games based on first accounts. These games used documents such as letters, interviews of war survivors, as well as memories (the developers of *This War of Mine* used stories of family members who lived through two occupations of Warsaw) to frame their game in terms of narrative and possibilities available to their players. Many facets of my identity connect me with immigrants and refugees. I have stories of immigration as the French son of Algerian

immigrants and as a French immigrant to the USA. Documenting my experiences would constitute an important step in the gathering of first accounts. I would also interview other immigrants and refugees to document their experiences. This multiplicity of accounts would give me a solid basis to better understand the complexity of immigrant and refugee experiences. I would also consider the possibility to create a game in which players/students play several characters immigrating to various parts of the world. This could work to introduce the multiplicities of experiences in regard to immigration. As someone who does not have programming skills, I would have to seek partnerships and grants to make such a game happen. Grant writing is an avenue I would have to explore. Connecting with video game designers is something I have already engaged with. As a matter of fact, I have contacted Seth Alter, the creator of *No Pineapple Left Behind* (Subaltern Games, 2016), when I contemplated using his game in my teaching. While our discussion has not gone to great length yet, I do see possibilities in terms of partnering with independent video game developers to bring critical games to life.

### **Implications for Practice**

Current technology means that our culture is inundated with visual and textual designs from the minute we wake to the minute we go back to sleep (Villaverde, 2008, p.86).

Because my work is located at the intersection of education and video gaming as a growing socialization force, the implications for practice flowing from this study touch various fields. The first deals with the four cogwheels I identified. These video gaming elements can be used by socially engaged video game developers in the creation of their

games. They can use these elements as a theory and blueprint to plan, inform, or evaluate their work. Games that are socially engaged are still a minority in the mass marketing of video games. The cogwheels I have identified can help a greater number of designers think about their work as socially meaningful.

These cogwheels could also be used in preparation programs for future game designers. Classes that blend video gaming design and social commentary can help future video game designers understand their role and responsibility in shaping thinking and culture. Using the cogwheels in this context can also avoid the danger of separating classes that address social responsibility from what is mistakenly seen as neutral core design classes free of politics and social meaning. Moreover, these cogwheels are based on my experiences as a member of that community. This factor can help future game designers better connect with my experiences and findings as we share the same culture. They may be more open to listening to the impact of video gaming on society from one of their own. They can also encourage designers examine their own thinking and practicing in their creative process.

The third implication is meant for public school educators and administrators who are flooded with the latest apps, tools, and other such 21st century gadget or craze. This fever for technology is coined technophilia. Tenner (2002), who identifies as a technophile, proposes the following definition: the “enthusiasm for the products of human ingenuity, for the craft, skill and cultural influences they reflect and exercise, and for their beauty - or sometimes their inspired ugliness” (p.135). I propose another definition of technophilia: an unexamined hunger for technological advancement

informed by an idea of progress directly shaped by neoliberalism without regard for justice or social responsibility. Schools are rushing down the technological path faster than we can question it or understand where it may lead us. With the fall of virtual reality prices, VR goggles are entering schools and homes. Applications, games, and VR experiences that focus on empathy are already blooming. For example, VR experiences such as *Injustice* (Kalpana VR., 2015) place the player in the shoes of a bystander as they witness a young black man brutalized by police. *Welcome to Aleppo* (Ryot Studio, 2015) takes players to war-torn Syria. This centering of empathy can work to deflect from questioning our own responsibility in creating and perpetuating conflicts and social issues. By focusing on creating empathy and pity for the other, we are failing to question our own thinking, actions, and inactions in creating injustice. The four cogwheels I present can help steer discussions toward technology that fosters questioning citizens rather than paternalizing and patronizing individuals.

### **Limits of My Research**

While I aimed for a holistic study and tried to consider all aspects of my video gaming experiences I saw limits to the scope of my study. As I discussed this project with my good friend Chuck, a photographer, he pointed out that it would have been interesting for me to film myself as I played. Our discussion made me aware of an important dead angle in my study. I did not account for my body, its movements, placements, or immobility. He suggested placing a camera on top of my monitor to record myself and analyze the video later. His comments showed that the study of the body is in many ways absent from this project. However, a couple of months ago as I was deep into writing up

my findings a lower back pain flared up. It had been intermittent for years but became consistent and sharp. I visited a physical therapist who gave me clear recommendations: do not spend more than one hour sitting down at a time, take breaks, and move. I now do daily exercises to soothe the pain. This event made me further think about the invisibility of my body in my play and work. It had been taking a silent toll on me. While I would not call the work of an academic back-breaking (I saw back-breaking work in my father's forty plus years in the construction business), I am asking myself a few questions about a professional future that marries two activities that are now causing me pain. I have ignored my body and it is now screaming at me.

Another limit of my study deals with the difficulties I have had accounting for my dominant identities namely being cis-gender, heterosexual, and able bodied. I am not sure how to evaluate whether I did justice to my accounting for them. I did surface problematic behaviors around sexuality and gender but my ability was seldom visible in my project. If anything, I showed that I was blind to it when I played *The Surge* (Deck 13, 2017). I was wary about playing that game because the game trailer presented the hero as “just another white guy.” As I started the game, I found Warren, the protagonist, in a wheelchair. That put me back in my place. From that point on, I looked for messages about disability and the body in the game. I thought like a critical game designer around this idea. This questioning about ability and disability mainly took place in that game because I had experienced a moment of shame at the beginning. This suggests that I need to educate myself on my ability and better work to account for it in and out of my video gaming and scholarly life.

Another limitation of this study lies in the system I use to play games. Before I moved to the USA, I only played console games. Since my move, I could not afford both a computer and a console system. Since then, the PC has become my main everyday tool. I only play games on this platform. There are many popular and acclaimed titles that I do not have access to. I do not have and have never played games like *God of War* (SIE Santa Monica Studio, 2018), *Assassin's Creed Odyssey* (Ubisoft Quebec, 2018), and *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013). The popularity of these games alone makes them worthy of study. They sold millions of copies and have an important cultural impact (Arif, 2018; D'Angelo, 2018; Sarkar, 2018). Studying the play of these games is important and something this study did not do or aim to do.

### **Closing Thoughts and Questions**

In birthing my rage  
My rage has rebirthed me. (Stryker, 1994, p.248)

This study took off when the literature I read on video gaming and education worked to silence my experiences. An important piece of knowledge was erased from the video gaming and education discussion. My ensuing rage was the sign of this injustice. A major aspect of my study was the birthing of this rage. By my studying my experiences, I honored these feelings. I engaged with my experiences and made sense of them in a way that changed me. I have shed light on changes I needed to implement to better act as who I aspire to be. My rage has helped me grow. In my growth, I hope to have shared some valuable knowledge on the video gaming culture and how the enchantment of critical players can work to subdue, blind, and silence them. My rage has rebirthed me into



someone who, through the critical analysis of his stories, has a better understanding of himself and his role in his community.

In a conversation with Art Bochner (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011), Mitch Allen stated that an autoethnographer must:

look at experience analytically. Otherwise [you're] telling [your] story - and that's nice - but people do that on Oprah [a U.S.-based television program] every day. Why is your story more valid than anyone else's? What makes your story more valid is that you are a researcher. You have a set of theoretical and methodological tools and a research literature to use. That's your advantage. If you can't frame it around these tools and literature and just frame it as 'my story,' then why or how should I privilege your story over anyone else's I see 25 times a day on TV? (p.276)

This critical autoethnography and the breaking (down) of my enchantment was a thorough and shattering study in which I used all the scholarly tools Allen describes. Through my work, I do not ask that you privilege my story. I only hope that I made a good case for wording and validating my experiences, the changes they have triggered, and the hopeful messages they convey for video gaming, critical pedagogy, and for our world.

This critical autoethnography did not stop after the two month observation period. I am still questioning what I do, sometimes to a debilitating point. I have learned to engage more meaningfully with a culture that is toxic and oppressive. Engaging with my passion is and will continue to be a struggle. Being a student of critical pedagogy is not a static shield that protects me from engaging with oppressive communities I am connected to. As problematic as it is, I feel a sense of belonging to the video gaming community. I have relationships with raidmates I find meaningful. These relationships and this sense of

belonging give me the responsibility to effect change. Rather than end my relationship with video gaming because that culture is marked with oppression and because I engaged with it problematically, I see in my community the opportunity to practice who I say I am. I also hope my work serves as an invitation for other critical scholars to examine their enchantment. May we find ourselves in these examinations.

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## APPENDIX A

### EPIPHANIES

#### **My ActRaiser Story**

*The oldest of four siblings, I am the only one who has a room to himself in my parents' apartment. Maybe that's the one of the rare advantages of being the only teenager in the house. I am sitting in front of the screen ready to roll. I put the cartridge in. The game loads quickly. Control pad in hand. I am set for a challenge.*

*"Ok, let's play this." I press start. "Alright, what's this one about?" I speed read through the scrolling introductory text eager to start hacking and slashing:*

*This world is in disarray. Bla bla bla. Monsters and demons roam these lands. Bla bla bla. humans need a savior. They call upon 'you', a minor deity to rescue them. "A minor deity? I guess that's all they could muster. Sure, I can do that." And so it started. Hours of fighting followed. As I took the minor deity through the levels, it grew in power. After the first city was founded, I was able to call upon magical fires, then came thunder bolts and fire breath. The stage was set. I needed more victories, more believers, and more power ups to defeat the Evil forces that plagued these lands. With each freed region, more humans believed. With each new temple, more worshippers sang the praises of their savior.*

ActRaiser was a good game. It was entertaining but not a blockbuster like The Legend of Zelda. It offered a mix of genres. One level was about hacking and slashing, imagine Mario with a sword and spells. The next level was a city managing game, think about Simcity, a simulation in which players can place buildings and create a town.

Basically, I spent one level dispatching demons clearing a piece of land, and then the next level was about managing that land in order to grow a city and help humans settle.

*Towards the end of the game, my character had become a powerful deity. Many humans believed in it. All along they had erected statues in its image and built kingdoms in its name. After hours of play the time for the final fight had come. That boss, the scourge of humanity, did not leave a particular mark on me. Defeating it was no challenge. I had finally saved humans. Their world was free of all they feared. My character headed back to the capital, head high, chest out, ready for glory. I thought I had won.*

As in many games of the early 90's, the ending sequence offered a series of scrolling texts and short scenes during which I, the player, was limited to reading and watching the epilogue.

*My character triumphantly marched back to his city. I thought I knew what' was coming. I imagined lines of radiant people dancing throughout the streets. Joyful kids on the shoulders of their celebrating parents. Colorful petals falling from the bluest sky. Well, the deity was not ready for what was coming and neither was I.*

*Deserted streets. No song. No praises. Not a soul. Nothing. The deity wandered through the streets. He entered the main temple where humans had placed a colossal statue in His name. That space was now empty. The statue was gone.*

*The narrator, who was wrapping up the story, explained that because their world was now empty of evil, humans no longer had a reason to worship. Therefore,*

*my character who had become a powerful god found himself abandoned. Forgotten, he became dormant.*



*A screenshot of the epilogue. The space where worshippers had built a statue of my character is now empty. I interpreted it as a symbol of human's extinct faith.*

This epilogue shattered what I used to think of as "winning the game." While the concepts of gold and glory had never appealed to me, they constituted what I had learned to expect from completing video games. From Super Mario Bros. to Sonic, the narrative was pretty much the same: triumph and prestige await the player at the end of the endeavor. ActRaiser's ending was not about that. ActRaiser's ending had a message about the meaning of faith and believing. That message shook me. It sent my head spinning. It made me question my understanding of religion, worship, believers, God, and gods. Questions swirled in my brain "do people only believe when they are

scared of something? If they are not afraid, do they stop worshipping and believing? In what other ways have people used gods or religions for their own ends? Where do gods go when they are forgotten?" Growing up Muslim in my native France in the 1990's, I had just a few people to ask these questions to, namely my parents. None of their answers satisfied my thirst.

I was only a teenager when I played this game, but this moment has stayed with me. The game and the reflections it triggered have impacted the ways in which I think about religion. As a matter of fact, my playing the game, amongst many other factors and events, has played a role - even if minor - in my decision not to follow a religious path, in forming my identity as a non-religious person. After that experience, I saw myself as a skeptical teenager which I understood as someone who had an eye for questioning cemented truths.

### **Aladin Cruise**

#### **The Newscast**

*Bienvenue au journal de 13 heures. Le nouveau film de Disney 'Aladin' est maintenant en salle.*

Oh no! Everyone is going to be speaking about this. I do not know Aladin's story. Am I supposed to know? It does not matter. My friends will ask me. I will hear questions about this story, where it comes from, what clothes he wears... but more hurtful I will hear why I do not know that information. Am I not the Arab in the group? I am supposed to know about this. I am supposed to answer such questions.

As I continue eating my lunch, a delicious tli tli with eggs and chicken, the anchorman continues:

*L'inspiration pour ce personnage vient de Tom Cruise.'*

Technical drawings depicting how Tom Cruise's face was used to model Aladin's features appear on my TV screen. The off voice speaks of it as a feat. It relates a story of achievement and artistic prowess in drawing from a celebrity actor's traits to depict an animated character. Something there does not sound right as I push aside the harissa, the dish is spicy enough as it is. Am I supposed to look like him? How am I supposed to look like him? He is an American movie superstar. I don't look anything like him. I am puzzled. Is he supposed to look like me or am I supposed to look like him? I hope no one I know watches this and throws it at my face. I do not have Tom Cruise's good looks. I won't know what to say.

### **Cédric**

Prince Ali! Sa seigneurie!  
Ali Ababwa  
À genoux, prosternez-vous  
Soyez ravis  
Pas de panique, on se calme  
Criez vive Ali Salaam  
Venez voir le plus beau spectacle d'Arabie

What the hell is he doing? Is this an Aladin song? Cédric, my best friend, is now officially an Aladin megafan. He tells me he has a tape of the soundtrack which he plays and sings along to every morning as he walks to school. I show him the most uninterested



face I can fake. He laughs. He does not care if I don't show any interest. I don't want him to sing it. I want him to stop and move on. We can't dwell on this. Soon enough, he might ask me about what is in the actual movie. I don't want to face that. Cédric keeps singing.

### **The Game**

Somehow, I get my hands on the megadrive game. Usually, movie inspired games are plain trash. This one is surprisingly good. Farouk and I take turns playing it. It's a nice and fun platformer. And somehow, I play the game and I enjoy it. I don't know if I should play it but I do. I don't speak about it with my friends. I keep the game in my room. It never comes up in a discussion.

### **Anniversary**

It will be the team's first raiding anniversary in a couple of months: one year of end game raiding. I created something that is approaching 365 days of existence. Me and nine other people joined forces to take on some of the most difficult challenges of Mists of Pandaria. One after the other, bosses fell. It started with Mogu'shan vaults where, in order, the Stone Guard, Feng the accursed, Gara'jal the spiritbinder, the spirit kings, Elegon, and Will of the emperor bit the dust. Then came Heart of Fear, Terrace of the Endless Spring, and the Throne of thunder. Four raid instances. Twenty eight bosses. Every time we pulled through. There were a few disagreements, arguments, and tears along the way but I always managed to rally the troops. Yes, ten people scattered throughout North America gathered every Thursday to play, to be together. We stretched

from the Pacific to the Atlantic, from the heat of good ol' Texas to the icy tips of Canada. And somehow, we were all under the same banner.

We would have never met if it was not for World of Warcraft and our guild. I feel like within the space of the game, I initiated something amazing. I need to keep this going. I need to show all of them how grateful I am, to show them that they count. The team is nothing without them. I am nothing without them. Dr. Casey taught me about servant leadership. She showed me how I could be a better leader at work. I applied her teachings in the game too. I must do something special for this first raiding anniversary.

### **On the Night of the Anniversary**

My voice trembles as I speak 'Ok guys, tonight is a special night. We have been an end game raiding team for one year tonight.' My idea could backfire. Things could go terribly wrong tonight. We are facing Garrosh Hellscream, the final boss of the expansion, the longest and most difficult fight we have had to face as a team so far. This boss has tested us like no other boss has. We have wiped so many times that Garrosh is making Tortos look easy now. We have banged our heads against that wall for weeks. Morale is low. In a three-phase fight with a few transitions, there are many abilities and strategies to learn and execute. One player making a mistake in the last phase of the fight, one player dying, means we won't be able to beat the boss. That also means we wasted more than ten minutes getting to that last phase and have to start over. I am the one who gets all the PM's. I get to hear everyone complaining about each other's' mistakes in these situations. Unity is fragile.



manager and his police officer dad in Utah, a home maker in Kentucky, her Everquest friend Near New York, a grandpa in Colorado, a grandmother scholar in Canada, a father of two daughters in the same country, a former competitive raider from a top US Wow guild... Despite our differences, we form a team, a group. We take on challenges that are designed to be faced by teams of coordinated, dependable, and interlocked efforts.

Tonight has to work.

We get ready for the first pull of the night. We eat a feast to get our food buff. Everyone gets in position. I start the DBM timer. At 3 we prepot. At 1 I charge in. Our assigned DPS dispatches their target Siege engineer timely. Everyone dodges the Iron Stars. Every Farseer Wolf Rider heal is interrupted. Ranged players move in unison to get out of desecrated weapons. Phase 1 cleared.

Phase 2 starts. We are quickly overwhelmed by the minions of Y'Shaarj. These adds empower themselves and tear through our healers. Wipe. 'Oh Oh,' I say to myself. "Ok guys, let's breathe. That was just to get us warmed up." Failure is knocking on my door. I tell myself 'please, not tonight.'

We respawn. We walk the walk of shame back to the boss room. It gets heavier with every wipe. We get ready for the first pull of the night. We eat a feast to get our food buff. Everyone gets in position. I start the DBM timer. At 3 we prepot. At 1 I charge in. The second pull of the night starts.

Our assigned DPS dispatches their target Siege engineer timely. Everyone dodges the Iron Stars. Every Farseer Wolf Rider heal is interrupted. Ranged players move in unison to get out of desecrated weapons. Phase 1 cleared.

Phase 2. Every mind controlled player is incapacitated. Minions of Y'Shaarj are disposed of by their respective DPS player. Everyone but tanks stack far enough for whirling corruptions. Ranged players move in unison to get out of desecrated weapons. All transitions are handled smoothly. Clean work. Garrosh is at 10% health. He rushes to the middle of the room to draw all the power from the heart of Y'Shaarj. He heals back to 25% and turns into an avatar of Y'Shaarj, a demented and deformed orcish demonic beast. He has reached 100 corruption. All of his abilities are now empowered. He is ready to unload. And so are we.

Phase 3 starts. We use bloodlust and boost our haste by 30% for 40 seconds. We blow all our DPS cooldowns: Battle cry, Avatar, second potions... everything goes

Garrosh is at 20%. Every mind controlled player is interrupted. Empowered minions of Y'Shaarj are disposed of by their respective DPS players. Now, even tanks have to move away from empowered whirling corruptions. Ranged players move in unison to get out of desecrated weapons and stay stacked as much as possible now that these weapons can't be destroyed.

10%. 9%. The stress is palpable. Everyone seems to be doing well. It's not every day. We have not lost anyone (yet?). It feels like we are spammed by Garrosh's abilities. This is turning into a race against time. Our cooldowns won't be back up to burst damage, healing, or mitigation. It's now (or never?). 5%. 4%. 3%. That's it. There is nothing he can throw at us that can stop us now. We are downing him tonight. 2%. 1%. DOWN! Nerd screams. I am overwhelmed with happiness, satisfaction, and relief. We delivered.

## **Don't Look There**

*Don't look there.*

Yes, that tiny highlighted “2” tells you exactly how many new messages are in that channel. *Don't Look.*

Yes, it's your raiding group. Yes, it's the team you created. Yes, a few of them are still your friends.

*Don't look.*

You got VERY upset the last time you looked in that channel. Maybe this time, if someone put a racist or sexist meme or link, you will find what it takes to call it out.

*Don't look.*

You don't want to be singled out. You are no longer the leader of that team. You have no power. More than half of the actual members do not know you are the one who put that team together years ago. They do not know you are the original leader. They do not know you.

Maybe this time, someone has called them out. Maybe you don't have to be that person.

*Don't look.*

Just yesterday someone mentioned the Pewdiepie story in raid chat, one of these youtubers who makes money by insulting his viewers and making racist jokes. “I really don't care for this. We are here to down bosses and make progress. Your discussion has no place here. Focus!” That is how one of our leaders shut that conversation down, in the name of ‘playing.’ How do you think they would react once you point out their racism

and sexism? How do you think they would react if you actually engage with what they are saying and laughing about?

*Don't look.*

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Bored out of my mind, I click the Discord notifications one after another like a zombie slowly eating through a fresh body. I am looking for something to stimulate me through this empty morning. Out of the blue, I see a casually racist cartoon, I scroll down frantically, hoping to run into something else another discussion, hoping to make that cartoon disappear. I quickly look to the left of my screen and realize I am in the dreaded “survey channel.” How the heck did I end up there? I told myself not to ever visit that section again. I knew that it would make me hate my team, that it would make me want to leave. I click in the different channel in the right panel of the interface. I sigh. I am not sure staying in that group is the right decision. It no longer represents the values I built this team upon. *You shouldn't have looked.*

### **Dota**

Rikimaru the assassin is a shadow, permanently invisible. With all the gear he needs, his critical strikes are now lethal. He has snowballed into an unstoppable killing machine. Every fights he is involved in is one sided. Unbeknownst to his targets, he sneaks behind them and assassinates them. Even when his opponents stick together, he throws a smoke bomb to cause confusion and use these precious few seconds of chaos to annihilate the most vulnerable in the group. Mages and healers are dead meat. He is fed. He steamrolls. He owns the scoreboard.

After adding a few more kills to his count, Rikimaru disappears waiting for his smoke bomb to refresh. He will be back for more blood once his abilities are off cooldown. His teammates and enemies know it. A wave of confidence flows through his camp. Despair and anger is flooding on the opposing side of the matchup.

“I hate that champion. He fights like a whore!” types one of the players just dispatched by the assassin.

“Can you explain to me how does someone fight like a whore?” replies one of his own teammates.

“I don’t know. He just does.” Confusion creeps in.

“How so?” The words are calm but slicing.

“I mean... it’s just something we say...” types the shamed player, incapable of explaining his own words.

“I would not say that. I do not say that.” The affirmation is clear. It is also non-threatening.

“Well...” There is nothing more to say. Nothing to defend these misogynistic and sexist words. A sense of shame and loneliness overtakes the player. As the seconds pass the shamed player fails to press enter, fails to respond.

“Well, maybe you should think about what it means and why you are actually saying that. I do not think there is a reason to say that.” That’s the nail in the coffin. The game is over. The shamed player managed to die to his opponents and get checkmate by one of his own teammates in the same game.

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As I write this story, I wish I had been the questioning player who put the spotlight on a teammate's misogyny and sexism. Unfortunately, I wrote this story because I am the one who used the sexist and misogynistic slur. I am the one who was dumbfounded, incapable of explaining the words I was using. I had read them online. They made no sense to me. And somehow, in the heat of defeat, I typed them. I am not sure why I succumbed to using that language. Maybe I thought that doing so would make me a full member of the DOTA community. Maybe I thought this was just a new saying players were using and that I somehow had to conform. No matter what, I ended up using them without understanding them. I will never know who the teammate was who called me out but this person's words forced me to examine my language and my thoughts. I had to think about what I was saying and why I was saying it. In some ways, I felt branded by this, marked by my own ignorance. I still carry that mark.

### **Hermaphrodite/Intersex**

*Please help me.*

Hi Lauren,

Let me start by saying that I am perfectly fine with you not being interested and that I am sorry if this is offensive to you in any way. Actually, I am a bit afraid it will be so I am not sure if this is even fair of me to ask you for help.

*But please help me. I need you.*

I am sure you are aware that I wanted to participate in the Rainbow Salon and that my request was denied. I have no issue with this decision.

*I do. I do. I do.*

In the reply message, it was mentioned that I used transphobic language and slurs and used gender essentialism. My problem is that I do not see it. I am not saying that I did not use any, far from it. I am saying that I used language that is offensive, and I am somehow blind to it. This is a problem for me. I obviously lack an insightful perspective on this topic and I am actually worried that because I am unaware of it I will continue using it.

*Please help me. I did something wrong.*

*I can't fix it on my own. I need someone to help me see.*

I did look up a few things on the internet to gain some understanding. [I found this](#). But I am not sure I am going in the right direction.

I have even thought about taking down the blogpost which I think is at fault. So I would like to know if you could help me with that. I know how difficult it is to talk to someone about something that seems elementary to someone because it feels like going back to square 1, but I think that the power of conversation is unmatched.

*Be that person for me.*

*I do not know anyone else who could help me with that.*

So here is my request. Would it be possible for you to read the post in question and then for you to tell me on Skype (if it is easier than typing) what's offensive with my ideas, language, and wording? I know you might think this is a request for me to argue that I am right. I am not right.

*I could show you that I used gender essentialism because it is what is in the game.*

*In my second post I was going to dive into that and dissect it. I wanted to show the pain gender essentialism creates and contributes to.*

*Please say yes. I want to show that I am not that ignorant.*

I just want to have a different perspective than mine on this so that I can grow as a person, as a respectful human being. I do not want to be disrespectful to anyone. Just the thought of it upsets me. Even though I am a man, I am a minority (Arabic and non-religious). I have never been accepted as French in France because of my Arabic background. I have never been considered Algerian in Algeria because I was not born there. I have never been seen as a person by Arabs in the US because I am not Muslim. The very idea that I have offended a minority is something that strikes me at my core. I can't get over it. I can't ignore it.

*That's it. I am naked. I made myself vulnerable. I show you a part of me.*

*I show you more than I should, more than I like to tell about myself.*

*Please tell me. Please answer positively.*

Would it be possible for you to help me?

*Please help me.*

### **You Kicked Him**

So, you call yourself a critical pedagogue?

Mmm (these are the sounds my inner growl produces)

Oh, that's right. You have nothing to say. Usually you talk and talk but when it comes to walking, when it comes to Praxis, nobody's there.

Just shut up.

You really think it's going to be that easy? You create your team. You set your rules. You stress community. You see yourself as someone who brings people together. All talk. You just kicked a kid, an 18-year-old kid, out of the team. After Ladee tells you that he is away from his family, that he is dealing with first year college stress and learning disabilities, that his mother is worried about him, you still kick him. You are such a fake.

You think it was that easy. You think that I did not struggle with that decision. It's all good to speak from where you are. You have no pressure.

You face no consequences. I coached that kid for weeks. We play the same class. We both play warriors. I quested with him to strengthen a bond. I know what he should be pulling in Heart of fear. I gave him

advice. I researched his rotation. I gave him resources. I pointed out gently that he needed to up his DPS. But how many times did we wipe on Wind

Lord Mel'jarak because of his low DPS? Enough for raidmates to start whispering me about him. They wanted him out. He is consistently at the bottom of the DPS charts. Everyone noticed. No one can hide from

recount. We had reached a wall. The team was not progressing anymore.  
We were in danger of collapsing. I had to make a decision.

Oh. I see what you are pulling. “It’s not me. It’s the DPS numbers.” That sounds like what administrators say when they ignore their own values. Or maybe the DPS meter is your value. You see, you are not so different than these behind-the-desk people you despise. It’s when situations get tough that we find out what we are made of. You showed who you are. Numbers over people.

It’s not like that. I had worked with him. I was supportive. It was not a ‘one and out’ situation. And I did not kick him from the team. I told him he would be a sub from now on. Other players were complaining about his performance. The fact that he never acknowledged his shortcomings was snowballing. He was also getting gear other players could have put to better use. That was hurting our progress. Players were upset. They were counting on me to make something happen. If I took no action, members might have started leaving. It was all on me. Even Ladee, who shared the info about his mom, washed her hands of any decision to be made. She told something along the lines of “you are in charge. You decide. I just want you to know the whole story.” What good is that? She handed me a bomb and then walked away.

Oh, how many other people are you going to throw under the bus Mr. Social Justice?

(evil grin)

Alright. I get it. You are not going to let this go. But you damn well know something had to be done and I was the only one who could do it. It was not easy. I still struggle with this today. I know what I did feels and is miles away from what I was preaching. I do not know how to bridge my ideal of the raid team and what I had to do to ensure the survival of the group. This reminds me of the Judge Dredd story in which they had to destroy that perfect chocolate bar recipe and ship his creator away from Mega-City One. That perfect recipe created chaos in the city. People were fighting over it. There was not enough for everyone. Riots and such did not sit well with Judge Dredd. For the sake of all of the citizens, for the sake of the city, Judge Dredd decided to sacrifice one of their

members. The maker of that chocolate was exiled, and all chocolate bars were destroyed. Social cohesion was restored.

There you go. Now your group is a dystopian future? Your chocolate guy agreed to leave. He understood what was happening. He went into exile willingly. He knew it was best for everyone, for the city. That kid did not agree with your decision. After you talked to him, he insulted you in chat. He hurled F bombs in Mumble to other raidmates. Open your eyes. You made that decision alone. You are not such a pretty and wonderful leader. I hope you see that.

I know what he did after he heard my decision. I needed a moment after I told him he was going to be a sub from now. I felt empty and dirty. I could not get that moment though: it was raid time. Everybody else was ready to go. I think this meant they were ok with my decision. That night, I tanked Heart of fear with his yelling in my ears. It still echoes in my head today.

### **My Video Gaming Self**

On Choosing a name and developing a video gaming identity -

A is for Arabic. When choosing the name of the Wow character that has become my online pseudo, I went for a name that was tied to my Arabic identity. I had researched historic Algerian names and figures. I decided to expand to North African names when the names sounded too contemporary. They did not evoke something distant, mythical, or unusual. Once I came up with a name, I googled it to make sure it was original. My search returned no matches. I adopted it. It became the name for my warrior. Years later, this is the name I am known by.

B is for background. When I rolled a warrior, I needed a background to help me understand, frame, and play that character. I could not create a mere class, an empty shell for my video gaming. My character is more than pixels. I had to conceptualize a story to play him in, to play within. I created a background that gave me an understanding of who that warrior is, what he would do in game, what he would not do. Once I understood that character's background, I was able to make sense of what I was doing in game.

C is for continuous. My identity has evolved over time. It is not cemented. My WoW name was an important step in establishing an identity. It started with a few important elements such as tank, background, Arabic, originality, and nickname. Today, my being online also involves my learning about concepts such as toxic technoculture and white supremacy. Asking myself questions about my place in society as an immigrant, father, and other facets of my being has triggered questions which have made me reexamine and redefine what my video gaming identity is.

D is for DPS. How I suck at it and how I hate that role. I was stuck dpsing for quite some time because of changes in the team raiding schedule. Playing that role does not correspond to my identity. Dpsing involves numbers, charts, parsing, toxic masculinity, dominance... Being forced into that role played a part in my leaving the raid team and WoW for 4 months.

E is for experimenting. I created many accounts and characters over the many years I have played video games. The video gaming name I identify with today was created more than 7 years ago. Because of the longevity of Wow and my involvement in a lasting guild, this name has become associated with me in WoW and beyond.

F is for flawed. I am always hesitant about speaking in discord. My accent is noticeable. I do not want to face the “where are you from” question. I usually speak only with people I have a link to, such as guildmates. When that happens, and I answer that I am French, I am also conscious that I am projecting a flawed idea of my French identity. Those I speak to are most likely to see me as a white French man, as a stereotype. I seldom talk about my being Arabic. One of the reasons is that in doing so I will also project the idea that I am Muslim. I am not. Too many layers of my identity I’d have to shed. I’d rather say something flawed than make myself vulnerable to strangers.

G is for guild. My house, my home. I had been a member of small guilds, three of them to be exact between June 15 2010 and July 31 2011. I consider these experiences failures/unfruitful. They dissolved when the leaders left. I decided to break with my habit of joining small guilds to apply for a megaguild. With over 5,000 members, this community would not disappear if a couple of leading players left. I have joined this guild on December 11, 2011. I have been a member ever since, with a small hiatus during which I transferred my main character to another server to help a friend. After a few months, I went back to my home. I have always left an alt there though.

H is for how hard it is for me to think about my video gaming identity beyond World of Warcraft. I have invested so much in this game (time, energy, created teams, wrote a blog...). This game has been a canvas on which I drew myself online. That canvas also acted as a frame. Combined with my guild, Wow became a silo. I rarely played other games and when I did I considered them breaks, interludes from WoW. I didn't need other games for entertainment. Despite all this, I never wrote a single



conference paper on that game. Is the research/leisure dichotomy at play here? Is WoW an unexamined game for me?

I is for identity 2, the addon that allows people to be identified in Wow chat by their main character no matter which character they are playing. I have never installed it. I have never needed to. My character and my identity are one. I only play one character. I used to toy around, to play with other roles and mechanics but I never did so to replace my main. I have focused on that one character for many years now.

J is John Doe. A few years ago, I dove into the secret world. I thought this game would pull me away from WoW. The promise of Lovecraftian storytelling as well as the classless system appealed to me. In that game, players must choose a name and a nickname. I redesigned the story/background of my WoW character to make sense in the game. I actually created a meta identity. I loosely imagined the pixels escaping WoW and traveling to TSW. I picked John Doe for the name of the character. The pixel transfer erased his memory. All he had to go with was his nickname. He did not know where he came from. I also created him to look like me. Although I could not make him chubby since the option is not offered in the game, I made him a light skinned Arab. I even modified the character throughout my playing to match my hair (from pretty much shaved to long).

K is for ko in my online identity. My online name is 3 syllables long. My online nickname is composed of the first two syllables of that name. My nickname ends with ko. In these two letters, I see a mark of my last name, Kout. This is another element that

shows the blend and connections I make between my video game experiences and other aspects of my identity.

L is lilXXXX. I allow my son to play games on my steam account. That allows me to monitor which games he plays and how long he plays them for. One of the unintended consequences of this process is that other players see him as XXXX. They communicate with him calling him XXXX in game. The first time this happened, he told me that he should go by lilXXXX instead. That touched me.

M is for more than a character. People use my Wow character name to refer to me, the player. I use that name as my account in many other games. I create characters with the same name as well and tie their history to my Wow character too. I even wrote a blog in which I brought together my Wow experiences and my leadership experiences. I titled this blog XXXX's theories.

N for Not sharing. I do not want to make my video gaming name known to those I do not play with. I am also careful about sharing my offline name with those who do not know me outside of video gaming. There are a few exceptions: my close family members, a few of my raidmates whom I interviewed for pilot projects or decided to share my name with after, only after, they themselves did.

O is for one as in one character, one name, and one identity. Some players have many accounts or many characters. They switch from one to another for various reasons. In WoW, some players use alts to complete some achievements, playing the auction house, crafting items for multiple characters... While I explored different classes, I have

stuck to XXXX for many years now. I use that name for other accounts and games as well such as Steam, League of Legends, or TSW.

P is for present. A few years ago, my wife drew a shield with the name of my character under it. She framed it and gave it to me as a present. She knows how much this means to me. Everyone in my family knows about my video gaming identity.

Q is for queer games. I use this term to define my interest in video games that bend rules, break them, ignore them, or expose them. Such games include beyond eyes, lovers in a dangerous spacetime, doki doki literature club, but also hatred.

R is for raid team. I singlehandedly started this team. It could not have come to fruition without other players though. I count this team among my greatest online achievements. Being able to gather 9 other people around a common goal and work through our challenges was no small task. Having lost the leadership of the team because of work and studies has been difficult. Seeing the identity of the group change was heartbreaking.

S is for Sandfrog. This was one of my first ideas for an online video game character. It compiled my French and Arabic identities by relying on the frog archetype and the sands of the Sahara. I chose not to go with it because it did not work as a character name. It did not have that character name/player pseudo ambiguity.

T is for tank. My favorite role in terms of gameplay. In the lore of the famous tank-healer-dps trinity, the tank is the one who protects other players by drawing the attention of the enemies and focusing their attacks. Additionally, the tank in mmorpg's is seen as the leader. It is the person who other players follow since that role controls the

flow of the boss's movements. It is the role that is the furthest away from number charts as its efficiency is usually evaluated in terms of success of the team (knowledge of the fight, disseminating responsibilities, calling shots) rather than pulling big numbers on a chart. I have played that role in WoW, TSW, and tried some form of it in League of Legends.

T is for transmogrification. This WoW option allows players to customize the look of their characters no matter what gear they are wearing. I have three sets that I stick to. Usually one is for tanking and the other two are for dps. I have not changed these sets in years. Every time I try to create a new one, I spend ten minutes in the 'wardrobe' and give up. New sets take too long to create, and they don't compete with the three I have compiled.

U is for undead. The Egyptian themed name went well with the undead race (I really don't like that term here, but this is the one used by Blizzard). Moreover, I cannot see myself playing anything but humans. I do not know and cannot know what it means to 'be' an elf, a dwarf, or a tauren. Undeads are cursed humans. They came back to life after death and are close to humans. Undead also echoes with the theme of rejection and therefore isolation. Undead were rejected by their human families after they came back from the dead. They did not fit in Azeroth and had to come together to make a place for themselves in the world. Sort of like the non-Muslim Arab I am.

V is for voice communication (Ventrilo, Mumble, Teamspeak, Discord...). When designing my name, I also thought about how people would use it, meaning how they would call me over voice communication software. The first two syllables sounded fine

and rolled off the tongue. That helped me make a decision. It also made the name finding process more difficult.

W is for World of Warcraft. This game has shaped my online persona, my video gaming (in and out of wow). My video gaming experiences have revolved around my involvement in this game. The social aspect of the game, the guild and friends I made, have brought me back to the game after every break I took. Even when out of the game, I keep up with my Wow friends through forums, and voice software. I have not made any friends in any other games.

X is for X-men. I have grown to feel more and more alienated in the video gaming space. This happens when I read video gaming news, scholarly articles, or run into sexist-patriarchal, misogynistic, racist video game content. The X-men are outsiders to the non-mutant society. I feel like an outsider in the video gaming world.

Y is for Yessica. She participated and supported me when I looked to build a pen and paper role playing group. She also joined me when I started larping. When these initiatives fell apart and WoW picked up steam, I had to negotiate my playing time with her. While she ventured into my other hobbies, the video games I play are not ones she enjoys. I am glad she is supporting me in my video gaming and therefore in my studies.

Z if for zillion. I own what I consider an enormous amount of games, 158 games on Steam. This amount is quite large, especially since I have not played all of them. I buy many games during sales and do not end up playing them. Some of these games I am actually happy to finish because I can place them in the “finis” category and clear up space in my main library

## **Orzul's Accent**

What was that? Who the hell just spoke? That accent was heavy as bricks. Did we invite a pug in here? I do not dare ask who that was. A fragile and short-lived silence settles. Fluffybunny breaks it. “That’s cool Orzul. We never heard you speak before. Did you get a mic?”

I am stunned. How long has it been? We journeyed together from the mountains of Icecrown citadel to the green hills of Pandaria for close to three years. Here is someone I have called a friend for that long. I realize now that I had never heard his voice before. No, not exactly. It is not his voice that stuns me. It is what his voice says about him. How much his voice says about my prejudice and ignorance. Orzul. The troll hunter. The tamer of wolves. Orzul. One of our Canadian players. Orzul. The one who occasionally misses raid night to attend his girls’ school plays.

Three years without a word in vent or mumble. Three years of listening and typing. And then, after what looked to be a usual Thursday night, while we were casually debriefing and talking, he unloaded a bomb on us all. Was it an Indian accent? I thought he was Canadian? Well, now I know I thought this meant White straight “flawless” English speaking Canadian. Really all I knew was that he lived in Canada, my prejudiced story about him flowed from that. I was so ignorant. In what other ways am prejudiced? How much do I actually know about those I play with? How much are they holding back? I am not telling them everything about myself, why am I expecting them to?

I have all these wonderful ideas about the potential of video gaming to bring people together, to build bridges across difference and I can’t get someone who has an

accent, like me, to speak in my own team. I do not know why it took him three years to speak to us. I do not ask him. I never ask him. Was he scared or self-conscious about his accent? That can't be it. I have an accent and I speak all the time, as the raid leader, I have to. He had the possibility to be silent. He took it. Did I think I broke some kind of language barriers by speaking with an accent through a video game? Did I think I was some kind of trailblazer in my team? I did. I was wrong. I do not know why he chose to speak that night either. Was there a trigger? Was he more comfortable that night? Did he really buy a microphone after three years of raiding with us?

Bulgarian? Bulgarian! What the hell! He is European too! I am even more confused now. Did he run away from Ceausescu? Does he remember Kostadinov at the Parc des Princes? Why did he not tell me? What did the team mean to him? How different is that from my vision? I am the leader. I should be able to instill a spirit of justice in what I do. I thought I did.

### **Papo y yo**

To my mother, brothers and sisters with whom I survived the monster in my father.

-Vander Caballero

*Tucked in a corner of the closet, Quico sees the silhouette of the monster through the blinds. The house trembles with each stomp the monster takes. Quico presses Lula, his yellow robot, tighter against his chest. A magical spiral glyph is drawn on a wall inside the closet. It shines bright in the darkness. When the radiant glyph is complete,*

*Quico is sucked into it. He leaves his world and enters a fantastical one. The game starts.*

*I now control Quico. He responds to my control pad.*

From the opening quote, the “Papo y yo” video game has been framed as an allegory of Caballero’s childhood: growing up with an alcoholic and abusive father. Caballero, the game designer, developed a narrative and gameplay that are anchored in his experience. The monster is a representation of Caballero’s father.

*The monster and Quico sharing a peaceful moment*

He is bulky, horned, and several times the size of Quico. He is also nonchalant, lazy and rather carefree. Early in the game, I crossed paths with the monster in the fantastic world. I learned that he has an addiction for frogs. Whenever he sees them, he chases them and devours them. After doing so, he enters a flaming rage and beats on everyone nearby - friend or foe.





Quico takes it upon himself to cure the monster. The game is the story of that journey. Level after level, I guided the lazy monster by luring him with coconuts. His appetite is such that he will walk to them, pick them up, and eat them. The coconuts are safe to eat for the monster. They offer a way to safely move the monster throughout the levels.

### **Of Coconuts and Fire**

I reach a large closed area. I know I need to find a way to open an exit. The monster is in the middle of that large area. He is doing monster things, lying on the floor, doing nothing. Everything is quiet. I rotate the camera and run around to explore my surroundings. There is a cogwheel high up against a wall. This must be the key to opening the exit. I have to reach it to move forward to the next level.

I jump here. I jump there. I wander to the top of that house, and then that one. I try the roofs. A hidden platform. Yes, that was it! A moment of small victory. I activate the cogwheel. Klik! Clak! What is that? It's not supposed to make that sound. What's happening? I unwillingly triggered a series of mechanisms. First, the platform I was on disappears. I fall back down in the closed off area, my back against the wall. The only way out is walking straightforward towards the monster. Second, a magical opening above my head starts pouring dozens of frogs between me and the monster. My heart pounds with fear. I understand what's coming. As I rush for a way out trying to beat the inevitable, the monster is already eating frogs. I am cornered. The frog rush is kicking in. He erupts in a booming rage. He blazes towards me. I have no exit. My pulse goes through the roof. I run along the wall trying to put as much distance between us as I can,

but I am trapped. His rage is uncontrollable. He grabs me and throws me around like a lifeless piece of garbage.



*The monster has eaten a frog. He is in a devastating frenzy.*

As I land upstairs, my mind switches to video gamer/puzzle solver mode. I start reflecting on what I have done wrong in order not to fail again. After all, games are designed with the expectations that players will fail 80% of the time. Players go through this self-reflection process all the time.

This is when it hits me like a truck.

I freeze.

I think.

I hurt.

I knew about the monster's addiction; therefore it was my responsibility not to trigger it. As a player, I had failed to foresee how the situation was going to play out, therefore it was my fault the monster got angry and beat me.

*Is this what Caballero thought and felt when his own father beat him?*

Choking up.

*Did I just get a window onto someone's pain through a video game?*

Shocked, My control pad slips through my fingers. My head is spinning with horror and possibilities.

*What did the game do to me?*

I could not manage it. I felt bad playing. *Papo y yo* was just a game for me. It was so much more than that for Quico or Caballero.

I was overwhelmed by a sense of guilt and disgust as I had rationalized and justified the monster's abuse by blaming myself. I was disturbed by the fact that my gaming thoughts may have mimicked the thoughts, feelings, or guilt felt by abused children. It is impossible for me to claim to have felt what Caballero felt as a little boy, but the gameplay triggered powerful questions and feelings that are linked to Caballero's experience. I had found what Bogost calls "meaning in mechanics." This experience made me think and feel beyond pixels on a screen.

### **The Message I Could Never Send You**

Fluffybunny,

I sent you a message to explain why I left the group abruptly yesterday night. I didn't tell you everything. Some four years ago, when I gave you the lead of the group, I felt and told you that you were going to do a great job with the team. I write in this letter what I might never share with you in person.

At the end of the Mists of Pandaria expansion, I became disengaged with the game because Blizzard had not given us new content in close to a year. We ended up

running the same dungeons and raids over and over again. Like many of us I got bored and tired of it. You and a few others did not. I would play sporadically. My routine of logging in early and getting the team together invite after invite was no more. I started missing one raid day, and another, and another... I communicated with the team less and less. At some point, I stopped communicating with the team directly. You became my point of connection with the team. I slowly stepped away. You stepped up in the empty raid leader seat. I was thankful that someone was able to keep the group going. You kept the team together. I am thankful you helped the group survive this slump. Without you, there may be no team today.

A few months later Warlords of Draenor was released. With this new expansion, you initiated an important change. Historically, we had been a team that raided once a week. You added Monday night to our weekly schedule. You ran the decision by the team. Those who spoke agreed with you. They were excited even. I was in disbelief. Like everyone else, I was excited about the Warlords of Draenor. But playing two nights a week was not possible for me. I could not commit to spending two three-hour nights on my computer away from my family. That was a decision that I, as a raid leader, would have never brought forward. You did. Before the expansion, I was looking forward to coming back to the team and tanking. However, the tanking role is one that requires assiduous attendance. Playing and rotating 3 tanks for 2 spots would not allow us to progress. Too much time would be spent on learning fights. Too much loot would go to waste. And in the social world of raiding, the convention is that teams have 2 tanks and 2 tanks only. Two nights a week would not work for me. I was never going to tank for the

team again. I understood that many of our raidmates wanted to play more, to progress faster. We had been one of the most successful raid teams in our guild and while many teams broke up during the year long slump we were still there. My preferred role, my tanking identity was gone.

The truth is I felt robbed, pushed out. The team I had created and led for so many years was leaving me out. The tank everyone had learned to rely on, the shield everyone stood behind was now put aside. I swallowed these feelings and forcibly switched to a DPS role. That left a bad taste in my mouth. Three years later, it still lingers.

I never enjoyed playing DPS. Too many players see that role based on numbers. They compare the damage charts like some compare the size of their dicks. I purposefully use sexist/patriarchal terms here because many of the new players you recruited think, speak, and behave like that. Women included. That's your team.

We used to be a 10-man raider team. A small number that allowed us to know one another, to feel connected to one another. Warlords introduced flex raiding and all of a sudden, you invited everyone and their grandma to the team. Players came for one encounter and left before the next. You implemented some kind of open-door policy and invited whoever wanted to join. While I appreciated your openness, your choice created many issues. Many of them are still not addressed today. People joined in cliques. They came in with their friends and brought their idea of gaming with them. When I was the leader, part of my role was to serve as the gatekeeper. I wanted to salvage what we had. I did my best to create an atmosphere that was welcoming and accepting. I spent time thinking about the philosophy and meaning of what it meant for people to play together,

to be together in this online space. I delighted in the fact that on our team we had a father and his gay son, a grandma from the frozen lands of Northern Canada, a Bulgarian immigrant... and so on. Here I do not aim to reduce our friends to these facets of their identities but rather to show that through gaming we were able to bring people together from many different backgrounds and accomplish something together even if that was just slaying Internet dragons.

I am not feeling this anymore. We are all mostly strangers. There is a core to the group, it feels like a private club. Despite your many thanks to all the players for contributing to the team, I do not think we form a community. Just last week, I briefly spoke to your dad and he confirmed that. He longs for what we had and is disappointed with our team dynamics.

I can't tell you that in person because you are my friend and I don't want to hurt you and our relationship. I loved the team we had. But I don't recognize what you have made of it. I am going to step out for some time. I just don't know how long.

### **Stuck with Songs and Cider**

Butt in my chair,  
Feet on my desk.  
Plugging headset.  
Launching Discord.

Take a sip or drink it whole.  
You are ready for tonight.  
Heads will roll.  
Take a sip or drink it whole.  
Apple cider won't get you out of that hole.

They talk IPA, stout, and lager.  
I like *cidre doux* not cider.

Apples rather than grain.  
Fruit rather than malt pain.

Take a sip or drink it whole.  
You are ready for tonight.  
Heads will roll.  
Take a sip or drink it whole.  
Apple cider won't get you out of that hole.

Cider is ok but not that sweet.  
It tastes of apples and defeat.  
Trying to drink my way to friends.  
Trying to drink my way back to France.

Nerd screams are good.  
Give me a sense of brotherhood.  
They just aren't enough.  
Nothing like Pierre's laugh.

Drinking at raid start.  
Drinking when fights fall apart.  
Same gestures behind our screens.  
Same distance between our beings.

Take a sip or drink it whole.  
You are ready for tonight.  
Heads will roll.  
Take a sip or drink it whole.  
Apple cider won't get you out of that hole.

### **This War of Mine**

A grey sun is rising on the steaming ruins of Pogoren. The sunrays hit Marin's face and wake him up. The group had not salvaged enough plywood to block all of the broken windows. Marin's night had been rough. It was his turn to sleep on the war cold cement floor next to the scavenged boiler. The others shared a mattress in the same room. Brought together by rains of bombs, it is the only place this group can call home.

After wiping his eyes, Marin looks around for Pavle. He should have been back by now. Pavle, a former soccer player, was the fastest of the group. He could sneak through town and avoid soldiers. That's why he was picked to go out last night. He was most fit to survive on that run but there is no trace of Pavle this morning. No sign of the medicine he was to find and bring back.

As he looks around, Marin's eyes cross with Katia. Her eyes are red and wet with worry. "Pavle isn't here." Her voice cracks. "He has not come back." Marin answers with silent tears. He hugs Katia in a move that fails to bring them comfort. They know Pavle is dead. He would have never broken the rule. No one breaks the rules. If you are picked to go out at night, you must find food, medicine, scavenge useful materials and come back before sunrise. The warmth of the hug does not erase Pavle's absence.

Bruno ruffles his blankets as he rolls over. Katia and Marin switch their attention to him. He does not wake up, still ailing from a sickness they can't diagnose. No one in this group of fortune has a medical background. Katia and Marin look at each other, a moment of silent communication, they know that one of them has to tell Bruno they do not have any medicine to give him. Bruno will understand what happened to Pavle. He will feel guilty. His sickness is the only reason Pavle went to that militarized neighborhood. That's where the only drugstore accessible by foot is located.

Bruno still needs medicine. He might not make it through another day. They need food. They need wood for the boiler. The sun is rising, and they must already think about who will go out that very night. Who might not come back. That day is a slow and heavy grind toward that inevitable choice.



Katia never thought her fitness classes would help her face a war. She is the one heading out. She hugs Marin, takes one look at Bruno. She knows where she is going. A few nights ago, she snuck into the house of an elderly couple. Then, the husband had begged Katia not to take anything. He was crying that his wife was sick and needed medicine. She felt guilty. The elderly couple was more vulnerable and more needy than Katia and her friends of fortune. She left that home empty handed and came back to the group's house. "Tonight is a different story" she said to herself. "All I need is enough medicine for Bruno and some food for us. That's it. That's all we need. They will still have something left." They had lost Pavle the night before. They could not lose Katia or Bruno tonight. Going to that house was the easiest, safest option. She was preying on the weak so that they could make it.

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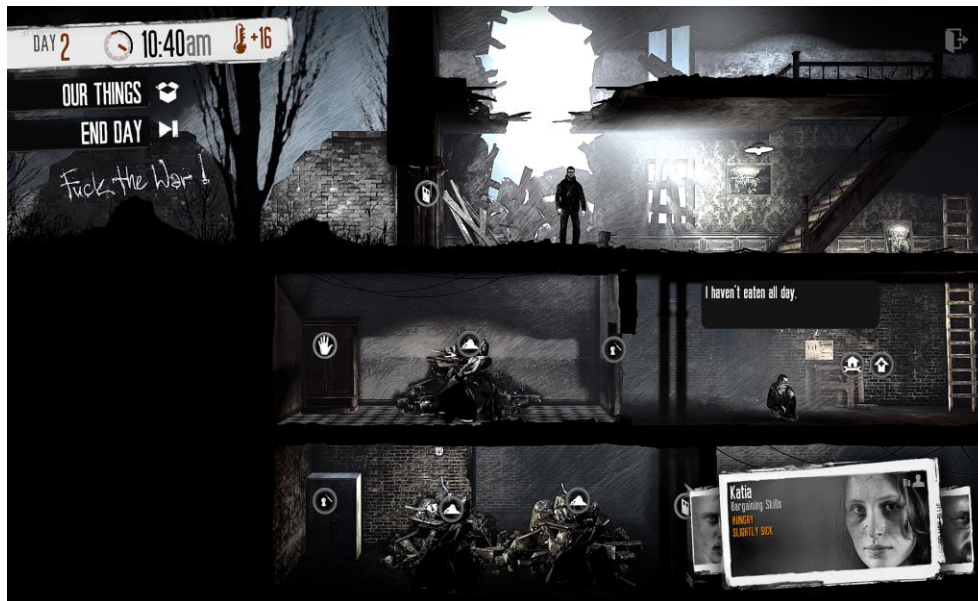
As Katia breaks in, the old husband begs her again. "My wife is sick please. I implore you. We are old. We cannot go out and find food and medicine." Katia muscles her way through, pushes him to the side. "My wife. Please. My wife will die." Katia directs all her attention into her task until the words of the old man turn into white noise. She does not hear him anymore as she rambles through the cabinets. "Find what you need and leave. Get the medicine. Get some cans and get out. Out," she says to herself. The face and the words of the old man are now mere blurs. Once her backpack is full, she sprints out.

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Bruno has his pills now. Today might not be the day he dies. He swallows his pills and rolls over. Katia is still in the entrance. She has not moved from that cold gray room. Her eyes are open, but she sees nothing. Her bookbag drops to the floor. So does her mask. The scenes are coming back. Everything is imprinted in her memory. The voice of the old man echoes in her head. She knows what she did. She picked the weakest people. She chose those who couldn't fight back. Katia, a few months ago a reporter, someone who wanted to do good, is now preying, stealing, feeding on the weak. The weight of her own shame and inhumanity brings her knees to the ground. "Is this really me? Did I really do this? Is this the price to pay to survive? War took Pavle. I think I killed this old couple. How much of me is still alive? How much of me will survive?"

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This War of Mine was partly inspired by the siege of Sarajevo in the Bosnian war of the mid 1990's. The creators of the game researched first accounts of war survivors to design their game. Even if the stories used for the development of This War of Mine were tied to the siege of Sarajevo, the creators wanted their work to be about the psychological toll war takes on people who are not soldiers. They wanted their game to say something about war and humanity rather than retrace the events of a specific conflict.



*Pavle's inner thoughts to the player: a signal that food is becoming a priority for whoever will be sent on the next night run.*

The subtitle of the game is “in war... not everyone is a soldier.” This game tells the story of such people, strangers thrown together by the war. The goal is simple enough: survive. I controlled all four group members. I am the one who made decisions such as who to send out to scavenge resources. I am the one who sent out Pavle to the dangerous neighborhood in order to recover medicine. I controlled Pavle as he was shot by a sniper. I am the one who decided to send Katia to the house of the elderly couple. Making that decision was difficult. I had lost Pavle the night before. I needed the group to survive. I needed my group to progress in the game. I did not want to send another character to their death a second night in a row. Picking an easy target for Katia was my decision. When I heard the old man's plea, when I heard him beg, I hesitated. This may ‘only’ be a videogame but knowing that his words had roots in an actual war, that they may have been uttered by a person, hit me.

After I brought back Katia to the group house, she became unresponsive. She did not answer to my clicks. She started speaking out loud to herself about what the war made her do. About what I made her do. That wrecked me. I had said to myself that stealing from the elderly would be a onetime thing. We would come back with the medicine. Bruno would feel better. We would move on to scavenging other locations. We would not steal from the weak and needy again. That was not possible for Katia's. The game indicated that she had entered a depressed state and that she would not be able to do anything anymore until someone spent time with her, listened and spoke to her. She stopped moving and collapsed on the floor. With Pavle dead, Bruno sick, and Katia depressed, I only had Marin to work with. I knew I had to use him to care for Katia. I also knew I had to send him out that night to find food: he was the only healthy person left. I could have made that choice. But I did not do it. I had to stop there. I could not continue playing. The game felt like a death spiral. I had no hope that I would be able to achieve anything in this playthrough. Pavle's death, Bruno's illness, and Katia's depression were challenges I felt I couldn't recover from. I was certain that by continuing to play I was going to see my characters die one after another because of snipers, illness, or exhaustion. I had to take a break. That was too much. How many more immoral decisions would I have to make? The game wrecked me. I had to stop playing it. I knew the choice I made was not an option for people in any besieged city.

The narrative and rhetoric of the game are far from that of commercial first-person shooters like Call of Duty (Infinity Ward, 2003). There is no hero in "This war of mine." There is no winning. "This war of mine" taught me about people stranded by war,

struggling to survive and to keep their humanity by placing me, the player, in the shoes of the decision maker. I asked myself questions about every decision I made. I had to weigh and face the moral consequences of my every move. Just like in *Papo y yo*, I can not claim that I know or understand what it means to be a civilian in a besieged city. At any point, I could and have turned off my PC. I was able to walk away from the game, write about it, and even forget about it altogether. This was not an option for people who were trapped in Sarajevo or any other rampaged city.

### **Time Gentlemen, Please**

“Welcome gentleman. How would you like your glass of racism tonight? On the rocks? A double? Or colorblind? I would actually suggest drinking it ‘just for fun’, that’s how the owners like it.” These are the exact words of the bartenders. They roll out of his mouth as cleanly and smoothly as he nonchalantly dries glasses.

Stuck. I look for something to answer to that. I must have misheard what he said. “I am not sure what you mean. Isn’t this a bar? I walked in because I wanted a drink. I am not sure what you are offering me.” It’s as if I pretend I did not hear the word racism.

“This must be your first time here,” he answers casually. “You are in the Warshall bar. We do have drinks but the tradition here is for every customer to be served a complimentary glass of racism.” He leans in, smiles, and in a somewhat sly and friendly way adds “It’s on the house. Tell me how you like your glass of racism. It will be my pleasure to serve it to you.”

He is not joking. HE IS NOT JOKING. Where the hell am I? I should not be there. He looks at me, patiently waiting for an answer as picks up another glass to dry.

I want to scream. I look around. There are a few people at the bar. A few more at tables. Everyone is going about their business. They all have drinks. They all have the same signature glass filled with the same translucent liquid. One of the patrons puts his glass back down after sipping on it. The liquid slowly slides down the inside of the glass. The liquid is thick and unctuous. It moves down the length of the glass like a leech crawling down to its marsh.

Gentleman, please take all the time you need. Like every customer who enters, you are entitled to your complimentary glass of racism anytime. Our pub is open 24 hours. Know that I will be ready to serve it whenever you have made your choice.” He leaves to tend to the patron sitting a few seats away from me, refilling his glass.

As I look around, I see white men scattered around the bar. Some at the counter. Some at tables. Some laughing together while sipping their drinks with noticeable enjoyment. Others one-shotting their glass like tough lone cowboys. This comfort makes my uneasiness worse. I don’t belong there. That space is not for me. On my way out, I pass by the Warshall hall of fame. Quotes and critique scores populate that wall. I get angrier with every line I read.

Warshall Hall of Fame
<p>“A joy to meander through.”</p> <p>Eurogamer: 9/10</p> <p>Gamesradar+: 9/10</p> <p>PC Zone: 90%</p> <p>PC Gamer (UK): 87%</p> <p>PC Format: 87%</p> <p>“Best price quality atmosphere in town. Visit it, you tight wad.”</p>

I will never come back.

### Unite the Right

Tears are filling my eyes. I try to focus on the road, but my heart is heading towards the ditch. Yessica had told me that this story was for me. She couldn’t know how hard that podcast would hit me.

In that podcast, Kevin Roose shared how he joined a discord server to investigate the American white supremacist movement. *Discord. They fucking use discord.* Discord is the latest en vogue communication tool used by people who play PC video games. It allows players to speak to one another and coordinate their efforts in game. It also provides a place for players to chat and stay in touch outside of the game via messages, messages, memes, emojis, videos and more.

Roose explained that this white supremacist server was the platform through which the Charlottesville Unite the Right rally was organized. This rally emerged in opposition to the taking down of a Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville. Neonazis, white supremacists, and white nationalists organized and discussed their action. This protest became a major event through which supremacists, neonazis, and white nationalists flexed their muscles and showed the country that they continue to be a force to be reckoned with. A counter protest movement arose. The clash provoked by the racist forces of the Unite the Right Rally left one dead after one of their members drove a car at antiprotesters killing Heather Heyer.

*Why wouldn't they use Discord? The gaming world is a white, sexist, racist, patriarchal space. Of course, these gamers would use the tools they know to rally and organize. I had already felt a sting, a twitch when I learned about Steve Bannon's gaming story. This put it over the top.*

Bannon, a former Goldman Sachs investment banker, worked as the CEO of Internet Gaming Entertainment (IGE), a gold farming company. His company hired Chinese workers to collect in game currency, such as gold, and rare items in games like World of Warcraft. IGE sold these ingame items to players all over the world for hard cash, a practice known as gold farming. Many players saw this as cheating. Players, commonly referred to such practices as “pay to win.” Disgruntled, they exercised pressure on video game companies. They congregated, organized, formed a movement, and demanded change. They flooded the WoW forums and forced Blizzard to take action.



They forced Blizzard to stop gold farming. They brought IGE down. They took down Bannon's company.

*A group of people coming together to push for change. That looked so great on the surface. I am getting mad thinking about this.*

Bannon learned from that experience. He understood that those who took down his company, "white males who spend all their time online" had "monster power to go out there and affect change." He thought that "they operated at a kind of sub rosa level that most people didn't see." Right after IGE's fall, Bannon went on to lead Breitbart news, a far-right American news network. There he focused on politicizing the power of the very people who had taken his company down.

Bannon's actions and Breitbart played a pivotal role in the US presidential campaign and in Trump's election. As Samantha Bee puts it "twelve years ago, a former Goldman banker wandered into a video game community, discovered a magical weapon, picked it up, and brandished it all the way to the white house."

The Bannon story was hard to swallow. Maybe the humour in Samantha Bee's piece sweetened the message for me. The podcast hit where it hurt. Maybe it was the combination of the two, back to back. The first hit to the gut made me lower my guard. The second blasts through my jaw. I was down. Discord suckerpunched me.

In the podcast, I could hear the online discussions, I could hear the voices of the gamers/Unite the right rally organizers. It threw me back. I could see myself in my chair, in front of my computer, my feet up on the left of my desk (always on the left), a bottle of

apple cider to the right (always to the right), listening to my friends as their Discord icons lit up on my screen.

*I have been less involved with my team over the last few years. Some of my friends have left the team. Strangers have joined. The newcomers do not know I am the one who founded this team. They do not know I am French. They do not know I am Arabic. Who are they? Could they be part of the alt-right? Do they think along these lines? What is happening to my community? Why did I give leadership of the team away? What the hell did Fluffybunny do to my team? Why isn't he saying something when he hears the dubious jokes? Why is my guild not doing anything about Charlottesville? I rage. But I still play. On and off. I don't make every raid night anymore. But I am still around.*

I was not ready to hear that alt-righters were using Discord. I was not ready to hear these voices. I was not ready to imagine them coming out of my speakers. That night, I talked to Yessica about that story. No, I cried about it.

Video games have been part of my life for more than thirty years. They have helped me grow. They have helped me see the world differently. Sometimes it is their gameplay that impacted, sometimes their stories, other times, both. Some games have troubled my thinking, others have repulsed me. I have embraced some and refused to play others. My story of video gaming is rich and complex, but it is minoritized. Probably for good reasons.

## Softbear



Square jaw. Piercing eyes. The perfectly groomed middle-aged white male anchor appears on the screen. “And now an update on the Karmool attack that left six Americans dead. In a patriotic effort to shed light on the president’s poor leadership and deliberate intention to hide his actions and mislead you, the American people, the brave Karmool committee is bent on asking tough questions. As always, Hoax News is here to get the Truth!”

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The assault and the deaths of these US governments representatives were in the news for years as right-wing politicians and media pushed a narrative aimed at hurting the opposing party and administration. I was stunned to learn that one of us, a guild member, was among the victims of the Karmool assault. I did not know Softbear personally. We did not share the same main game, however we played under the same banner. I still struggle today to understand the meanings of this connection and revelation. In light of the politicization of Softbear’s death, one of the tenets of our guild kept ringing in my ear:

*“No politics in chat please. We are here to play.”*

*“No politics in chat please. We are here to play.”*

*“No politics in chat please. We are here to play.”*

With each ring, it sounded more and more hollow. Does it not anger you to see them use Softbear’s death? Do you not see how the silence you impose on us is political? Who does this “no politics in our guild” message serve? Who does it muzzle? How can we change this?

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Years later, on March 12, 2017, I sent a private message to Sharphammer, a raidmate and officer I had been playing with on and off for years. At that time, the Trump administration was pushing for what is known as the Muslim ban. I had read an article that showcased players who decided to protest that ban through their video gaming. One player in particular dressed her character with a hijab, took screenshots, and shared them on social media. Wow did not offer a hijab option, but I decided to find out if our guild could muster something. Ready to face the backlash from Sharphammer and the guild for breaking our “no politics” rule, I decided to send him the following message.

*hey*

*I know that there is a "no politics policy" in our rules but I would like to know if there have been any talks among officer or members regarding an initiative about the decisions made by the current administration. Our guild is US based but we count people who are not American and who may want some support or simply hear a message of compassion. Is that off the table?*

He never answered. I shut my mouth and did not go further. I did not want to be seen as a trouble maker.

## **Fair Play**

Who are you?

All I have is an outside. A name, Jamal Davis, and a #000000 skin. I am pixels on a screen. There to do your bidding and theirs.

What is your story?

They tell me my story is that of a black man who made it into a doctoral program. They tell me I am one of the few who had what it takes to make it this far. I should believe it but I don't. Do you?

Where do you come from?

I don't know. It seems my life started at the beginning of this game. No friends. No family. No close ones. No loved ones. I am nobody. I am #000000 on a skin texture. I am pixels on a screen. There to do your bidding and theirs.

Who made you?

A world-renowned educational video gaming laboratory. They read and immersed themselves in literature on implicit bias. I am born out of that mix. They won't say how much of a role their prejudice and will to help played in my creation. Good intentions...

What is your purpose?

They tell me it is to make a change in the world. They tell you it is for you to learn about racism in academia.

Who is to play you?

Professors and higher education administrators can play me. They can play my life and pretend to be me. They have their own definition of play though: "talking to

people is an important part of this game” they say. They mean reading, reading is an important part of this game. All I do is listen to clicks and move. Click and move. All you are to do is click and read. Click and read. When I am not angry I am bored out of my mind. If you knew our lives, you would be mad too. If you knew games, you be mad too.

What would you tell them if you could?

I would tell them they don’t know what it means for a minoritized person to make it in academia. I would tell them that academia is not the first sphere in which we encounter racism. Someone accuses me of cheating and it is game over? To make it in a doctoral program, we have to develop survival skills, coping skills, we learn how to bob and weave, how to roll with the punches. This ring is not ours. To make it this far in the academic game, we have to float like butterflies knowing we won't be allowed to sting like bees.

I would ask them why they think reading definitions of implicit bias and microaggressions on a screen is different than reading them in a textbook? Are these the games they like to play? Is this the best they can do?

I would ask if their life started when they entered a PhD program. I would ask them how much they think someone can learn about historical and social injustice by playing their game. I would ask them where the idea for this game came from? I would ask them how many people of color have worked on this game? And if these people do exist, I would ask them how much decision power they had? I would ask them how many more dry textbooks they would hide behind pixels?

## Mémoires De La Grande Guerre

‘What song do you want to listen to?’ I say as I snug Ulysse against me.

‘Let’s do the *Terraria* jungle music,’ one of his favorite games.

‘Yes, I like that one too.’ I youtube the song as we lay in bed spending the last few minutes of the day together.

**Jungle**

Composed By Scott Lloyd Shelly  
transcribed by someone else...

♩ = 100

5

9

After the two minutes and thirty-ish seconds of this eerie and catchy tune, it is my turn to pick a song. I go for the main theme of *Mémoires de la grande guerre*, *Little Trinketry*. We finished this game a couple of months ago. My brother had recommended

it. *Mémoires de la grande guerre* deals with world war one. I wanted my son to play it so that it could give us a reason to talk and learn about France. I know little about Algeria. Even if my parents took me there every summer when I was young, I stopped going there when I was about 12 years old. Speaking Arabic with French accents would have marked us as Europeans in the eyes of the Islamists. My father would not run the risk to go back to Constantine, third city of the country, first city of the Islamist party, city both my parents are from. I want my son to know France. I want him to know Algeria too. “To become American, you have to throw away your ethnicity.” These words ring in my ear. I don’t want my son to become amnesiac. I don’t want him to become white washed and bleached. I want him to know himself. The day he came back home and told us that he was not Latino because he was American was a red flag for us. Visiting his first-grade classroom and seeing that in his portfolio he had written that his skin was white started a whirlwind of questions and urgency on my and my wife’s part, especially since his teacher, a Latina, knows that my wife is Latina and I am Arabic. Rather than sit him down and give him lectures, I weave stories around moments and experiences: video games, movies, foods... I seize opportunities to teach about where he comes from. A point-and-click for the most part, the game’s slow pace allowed us to solve puzzles at our own rhythm and discuss game and stories all along.

*Little Trinketry* brings me right back to that final scene. Émile, a French grandfather, had been ripped from his family to fight in the name of France against the German army. He was forced to leave his daughter, his grandbaby, and his German son in law, Karl. Through his forced journey, he refused to succumb to the atrocities of war.

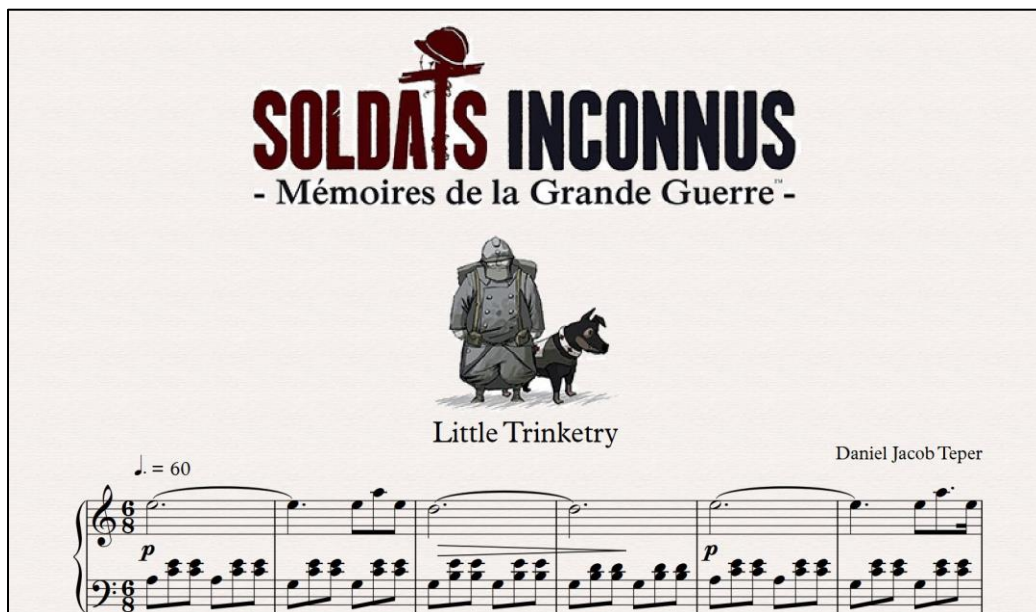


Towards the end of the game, Émile and his fellow soldiers are ordered by an officer to charge the Germans. This was certain death. This was butchery. Émile refused and during the altercation that followed, Émile accidentally killed the officer. The next scene shows Émile, feet shackled, taken out of his prison cell. He is sent marching as we hear his voice read the last letter he wrote to Marie, his daughter.

Dearest Marie:  
As the war ends for me,  
I have no regrets,  
I've seen too much horror  
I hope fate has been more merciful to you.  
Our time on Earth is brief,  
and mine has been filled with so much joy,  
that I can only be thankful for  
how much I've been blessed,  
most specially for the wonder  
you brought into my life.  
This letter is my last,  
I've been found guilty by a military court  
for the death of an officer.  
It was not my intention to kill him.  
War makes men mad.  
Though I failed Karl,  
I know my sacrifice has not been in vain.  
I fought for my country and my liberty,  
my honour is assured.  
Since it is the will of God to separate us on Earth,  
I hope we'll meet again in heaven.  
Keep me in your prayers.  
Your loving papa,  
Always.

As Émile finishes reading the letter, he turns around and faces French soldiers armed with carbines. The screen turns black. We hear gunshots and the thumping sound of a body falling to the ground.

*Little Trinketry* is not the soundtrack that accompanies Émile's march and death, but the main theme has stayed with me and Ulysse. We used to spend time listening to it before pressing start. The melancholic piano melody was captivating. I can't help but think that this music is one of the reasons Ulysse has asked me to sign him up for piano lessons.



Through that game, I talked to Ulysse about France and Algeria. Beyond the geography, I also shared the story of his great grandfather, an Algerian man who fought under the French flag during World War two. I wanted him to know about this now, not in his late thirties like me. I wanted him to understand the complexity of his identities. I found in a medium we both enjoy a way to connect to one another and to our stories. As father and son, I want us to spend time together, to build bonds. Tonight, as I play that song, I see that he is shaken. His eyes are red.

“What’s happening? I thought you liked this song. I thought you liked piano.”

“I do but it is sad. It’s a sad game. It reminds me of it.”

I stop the song and find another more cheerful tune to listen to.

*Should I have played a game about war with him? Do Children in Syria have a choice about the war they are in?*

I can’t help but feel that as sad as the game is, the song created a bond between him and I. I created a memory. Is this traumatic though?

*When do you talk to your child about the horrors of life, especially those they will face? Should I shelter my son from hurt or prepare him for a world that sees him as an aberration? When do you give your children a talk about the place that has been forged for them in the world? How do I as a parent know if what I am doing is right?*

I remember that Marceline Loridan-Ivens interview. Marceline is an Auschwitz survivor. She shared that, as a filmmaker, she tours schools to show her work on the holocaust. She shared that students would laugh and be detached from what she had to endure. There was no connection between her experience and theirs. The interviewer asked her how this plays out in her personal life. Marceline answered that she never had children, that she could not bring a human being into this world, a world of pain, a world of suffering. In a way, she was saying that she could not inflict life onto a human being. I do not want Ulysse to be one of these kids who laughs at the horrors of the holocaust, someone who is detached from the horrors of humanity, who lacks compassion, love, and understanding about the complexities and interconnectedness of injustice in this world.

*Does this justify his tears?*

## **Mike - Papo Y Yo**

I want to cry.

I feel awful. No, I feel irrelevant.

Did Dr. Mason realize that he placed me right after Mike? How am I to share a paper about a video game on child abuse after an actual survivor of child abuse shares his story? I am taken away and horrified by the terror and the rawness he is sharing with us. As my soul fills up with tears, I look around the room. Red eyes. Hands over mouths as if to silence the screams that want to get out. Everyone in the classroom is mesmerized and terrified by Mike's experiences. His words are first accounts. And there I am, the video game guy, the one who will read in a few minutes about pixels on a screen, ideas, and feelings that sent my head spinning. This feels insignificant. I feel insignificant. I feel disposable. I do not want to read my paper. I do not want to share my story. Speaking about learning about child abuse through a video game means nothing after listening to the words of a survivor. I feel blindsided by my professor. How could he have set this up like that?

The horror of his "mom." The torture he endured. It is disturbing and beautifully written. Heart wrenching. He mimes a holding a knife to his chest. With every sentence, he brings the point of the blade closer to his chest. He didn't kill himself. He didn't hurt himself but this was a battle he fought for years.

I do not want to study video games anymore. What can games do that Mike's words cannot? If anything, play the mother fucking game. Don't listen to me. I am nothing. I know nothing. I have nothing to bring to you. Listen to the survivors. They will

tell you. I am the middle man of emotions. The one who writes papers on reporting and analyzing others' lives and creations. Fuck me. I hate myself. I hate my work. I do not want to do this anymore.

*You know, there aren't many people in ed. leadership programs who have been administrators. You would have a leg up in the job market.*

*There is not as much work as you think when it comes to immigration, education, and advocacy. You should think about that.*

What questions should I ask myself?

Should I let video games go?

Should I go for educational leadership?

Should I focus on immigration?

Can video games tackle horrific topics? Or is it about me? Should I solely work with topics I am not connected to? I would never create a video game about child abuse. I would never touch a topic like that of "The Housewife." Should I be mindful of the topics I play and study? When should I keep my mouth/pen shut? I don't want to feel that I am exploiting a pain. I don't want to make a career out of someone else's experiences.

### **Day of the Departed**

I log in to ventrilo. I am a few minutes late but it's no big deal to me. I have never taken part in the Day of the Departed. It does not mean much to me. It might actually be one of these boring official obligations that has to be done. An event our guild officers organize because they have to. Another way games and their participants mimic what

happens outside of games. I show up because I want to support my guild and also because I am a bit curious.

I log in to WoW and make my way to the monument Southwest of Orgrimmar. I am riding my favorite mount of the moment: the rusted protodrake obtainable by completing the Ulduar raid achievement. It shows off my raiding journey, a bit of my skills too. As I fly over the deserted plains of Durotar, I click the ventrilo channel to listen to the conversation.

*Is he crying? Is he really crying?*

His voice cracks. He tries to contain his emotions until he can't anymore. One of our guildmates talks about Jack, his guildmate, his friend, who passed away. He tells the story of how their WoW friendship expanded outside of the game. He talks about the hole Jack's passing has left in his heart. He can hardly finish his sentences. His mouth is so full of emotions there is little room for words.

*Should I be here? Should I be listening to this? I did not know Jack. I don't think I have grouped with him. But Jack was my guildmate.*

I reach the monument and dismount. There are hundreds of us gathered around the statue. After other guildmates share stories of Jack, more guildmates share stories of those who "have departed" over the last year. We are then briefed on the proceedings of the event. We are asked to dismount, press backward slash on our numpad to walk (instead of running), and follow Jack's friend back to Orgrimmar. A cortège of hundreds walking back to the main city of the Horde. I am part of something much bigger than me. This is where I want to be. The feelings of awkwardness about not knowing Jack are

pushed away by a sense of support, commitment, and belonging. The Day of the Departed was not just a title. There is meaning here. This guild is something.

I think it is the moment I realized there was something about this megaguild. I had hesitated about joining this guild of thousands. I was afraid of being lost in the mass, of being nameless in a colony of ants. This moment showed me I was dead wrong. This guild is a society, a community, with rituals, meaning, camaraderie, compassion, and friendship. It is a group I wanted to be involved with. That day, I knew I would be in the guild for a long time. I wanted to have friends who would do that for me when I am gone. I wanted to do that for people who are close to me. I wanted to find such people.