

# **Let's Play with Academia: Overcoming The Limits of The Zoom Classroom via Video Game Streaming**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This talk outlines a study that proposes a means of teaching video games analysis to students by streaming and commentating on them in the vein of Let's Play entertainers. The pedagogy is intended to address the social limitations of the Zoom classroom, and the logistical limitations of teaching video games in higher education. The intended outputs of the study are resources shaped by its results (including seminar plans and a teaching guide), intended for use by educators who wish to teach video games as part of their practice. The study is being carried out with Undergraduate and Postgraduate students from the host institution in the University of Glasgow.

## **Keywords**

teaching, education, parasocial interaction, pedagogy, Let's Play, distance learning

## **INTRODUCTION**

This talk will outline a study investigating how the Let's Play format can be used to overcome the social limitations of the Zoom classroom and the logistical limitations of teaching video games. It will focus on the theoretical underpinning of the study, and briefly touch upon its logistics, limitations and intended outcomes.

The study is a small-scale, qualitative teaching study that involves running Let's Play workshops using researched pedagogical techniques (such as “think aloud”) for Undergraduate and Postgraduate students. The workshops will be bookended by questionnaires to investigate what students learned from the experience and how effective the teaching methods were. The intended outcome is the production of teaching resources shaped by this student feedback. The resources will signpost methods for including video games in the online classroom without the support of an institutional infrastructure and serve as a guide for how practitioners can use techniques informed by performers to create a welcoming online classroom that minimizes the social limitations of distanced learning.

Awareness of the educational viability of commercial video games as teaching tools (Gee 2003; Lacasa 2013) and objects of study (Buckingham and Burn 2007) which aid in the development of soft skills (Barr 2019) is increasingly prominent in academic literature and continues to be addressed at conferences such as this. However, the play and study of video games is not common in the classroom due to constraints of budget, availability of technology, and a lack of technical expertise (Rice 2007). This study cannot address these issues at an institutional level but will provide an outline for individual educators who are interested in introducing video games into their practice using a minimal amount of technology. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to raised awareness of video conferencing software such as Zoom, the required

technology and conditions to use the proposed pedagogy are now more commonly available. The context of the pandemic also informs the study, as the pedagogy of distance learning has been brought into discourse. Although institutions such as the Open University have been teaching at a distance for decades, most practitioners are not trained to teach online, meaning that during the pandemic, they were forced into virtual teaching without prior experience (McArthur 2021). Although some teaching techniques can be replicated, teaching on Zoom poses unique challenges addressed in work such as Brennan (2020); Quezada and Quezada-Parker (2020) and Stafford (2020) – to name but a few. A central concern includes creating a dynamic in which students feel empowered to participate without being physically present. This talk proposes that using techniques informed by gaming entertainers, who have built an online community by creating an engaging and interactive space using video gameplay, could help minimize the social limitations of the Zoom classroom.

Let's Plays are described by Smith et al. (2013, 133) as "an episodic account of a player's journey through a particular game or creative play in a non-linear game": creators record themselves playing games and provide commentary ranging from analysis to informal chatter, which viewers can comment on. Recorded playthroughs still exist, but Let's Plays have taken dynamic forms due to the growth of livestreaming on sites such as Twitch.TV, which in 2021 hosted an average of 105,000 streamers with an average of 2,788,000 concurrent viewers ([twitchtracker.com](http://twitchtracker.com)). The transition from pre-recorded content to live streaming provides viewers access to content creators in real time, as "gathered audiences can simultaneously view the gameplay and engage interpersonally with the player, effectively playing the game together" (Lin et al 2019, 3) via the chat. Using techniques pioneered by streamers to inform the delivery of educational content provides an innovative way to engage students in their education. There is a growing body of research highlighting the educational affordances of the Let's Play medium. Such research includes Hammad et al's (2021) investigation of the effect of live streaming on learning outcomes, Shoda's (2022) model of "Let's Learn" (515) as a form of literacy instruction which combines Let's Play techniques with pedagogy, and Göbl et al's (2022) paper on how student "Let's Play video production may accommodate constructionist learning approaches" (75).

My research focuses on the existing similarities between the delivery of in-person and online teaching and of streaming video games. This includes the concept of teaching as performance, which is a metaphor that has been often used in education (Pineu, 1994) and teaching methods such as the "think aloud" technique. The "think aloud" technique is a recent iteration of Bruner's (1978) scaffolding in which educators do not just instruct students through tasks, but guide them through the process of thinking. Linkon (2011, 53) describes the process "as an effort to remind students that the seemingly intuitive, magical process of figuring out how to begin interpreting a text actually involves some fairly clear and specific analytical strategies". As observed by Taylor (2018, 75), the "think aloud" technique is already being used by Let's Play creators and although this is generally not for educational purposes, there is much overlap, as this form of narration "makes external that which would normally only be "in [the creators'] head", but during a Let's Play this commentary is "typically accompanied with humor, frustration, and suspense". My workshop format uses both the entertainment and critical elements of the "think aloud" technique, in the style of a Let's Play to model and teach critical analysis skills to students. The intention is to include elements of entertainment to facilitate an affective experience of the game, whilst injecting moments of reflection to allow for the development of critical thinking.

This talk will outline the theory and method of the qualitative study used to test a proposed seminar structure whilst presenting an honest account of its limitations and the difficulties involved in implementing it. The intended outcome of the study itself is

to provide usable resources for educators, whilst highlighting the power of video games as media and social spaces for facilitating more effective educational interactions.

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