

Applying Ethnic Studies Pedagogy to a Video Game Design Curriculum

By Jimmy Duong

Introduction

Video Games are a multibillion dollar industry that is slowly gaining as much influence and power in media and the arts as any other medium. Despite this growing platform for artistic vision, the industry still struggles in diversifying its content and its representations of minority groups and women for its most popular titles. In my current teaching assignment, I was offered a very exciting opportunity to teach an art elective on Video Game Design at a middle school level. In the first semester I confronted two main challenges when leading the class. One challenge was that a majority of my students had issues with plagiarism because they gravitated to dominate representations even when offered the freedom to design their own games. The second was that I saw my students confront anxiety when they faced a technical problem on the computers they could not solve quickly. Some of them would shut down in terms of their focus and become quickly off task.

My hope was that I could combine Yosso's theory of Community Cultural Wealth with using the five core understandings of Critical Media Literacy Theory as a framework for a curriculum to instill motivation in my students. My ultimate objective was that I want my students to be more self-directed and empowered in their education using their community cultural wealth and prior knowledge as a catalyst. The impact of this project would be reflected by their projects which hopefully were inspired by their actual lives.

Methods

To conduct my research, I decided to modify the warm up section of my class for 6 weeks. Instead of going over technical puzzles involving coding and the program the students were using, I instead had one day a week dedicated over media analysis using Critical Media Literacy as a framework. The following is a summary of the topics that were covered and the activities that were conducted:

Week #	Focus/Critical Media Literacy Core Concept	Main Task
0	Preliminary Survey and Discussion to Understand Student's Prior Knowledge	Pre-Project Survey
1	All media messages are "constructed."	Analyze a stage from Resident Evil 5
2	Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own rules.	Analyze poster art for Lego Star Wars the Force Awakens
3	Different people experience the same media message differently.	Discuss the character "Black Panther"
4	Media have embedded values and points of view.	Analyze a video clip from the game "Age of Empires"
5	Media are organized to gain profit and/or power.	Analyze the intention behind "Fortnite"
6	Debrief and Reflection: Social Justice	Counter Narrative Discussion

While the curriculum structured around my warmup questions was critical to my project, it was just one component. In order to evaluate whether or not my project is successful in engaging students and making them self-directed learners, I collected a variety of data. The following are the sets of data that were collected for my project:

- Pre and Post Project Surveys
- Work Habit and Cooperation Grading Slips (Recorded in a Database)
- Student Response Sheets to Warm Up Questions
- Number of Participants during Warm Up Questions (For Project vs. Regular Days)
- 20-60 Second Animated Movies and Video Games Inspired by their Lives
- Keeping fieldnotes of my classroom observations during the period of the inquiry project.

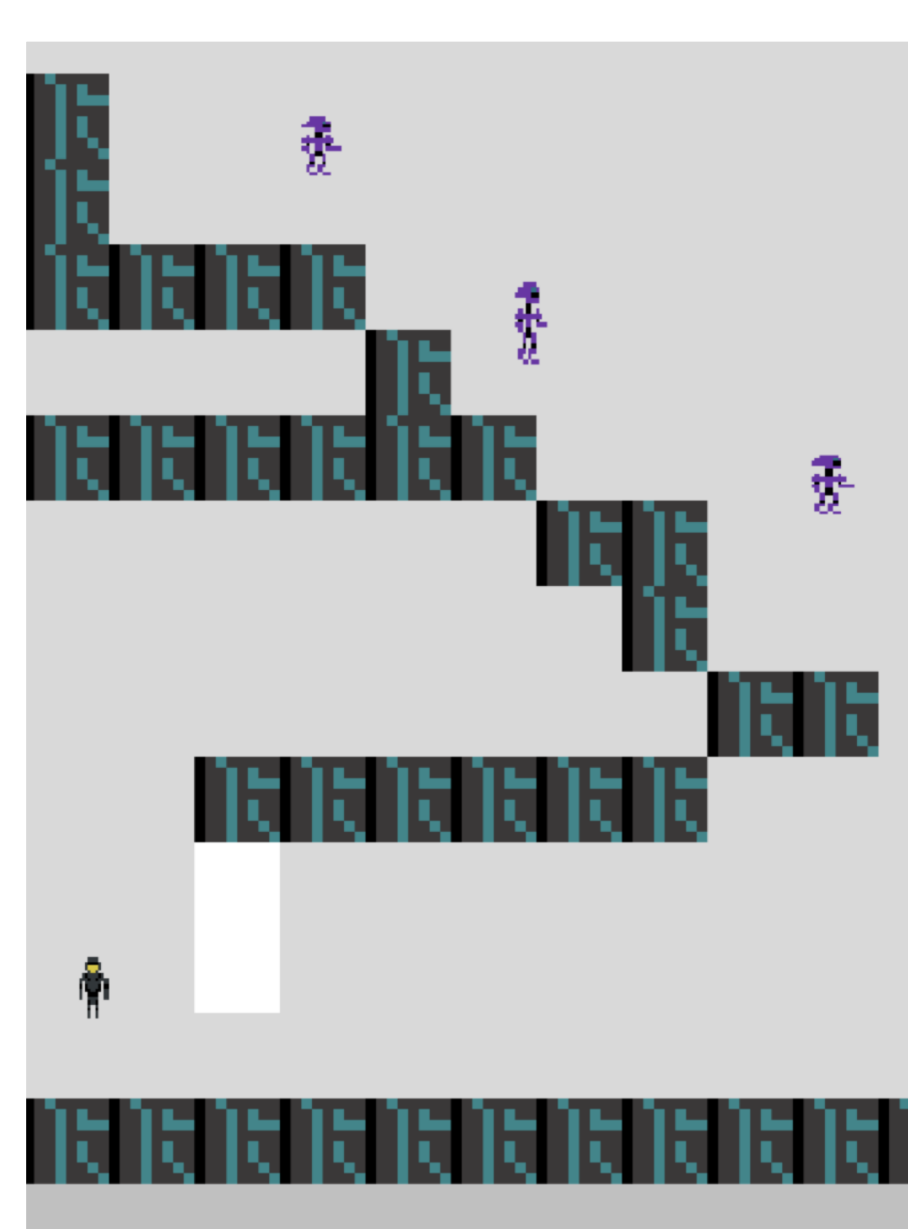
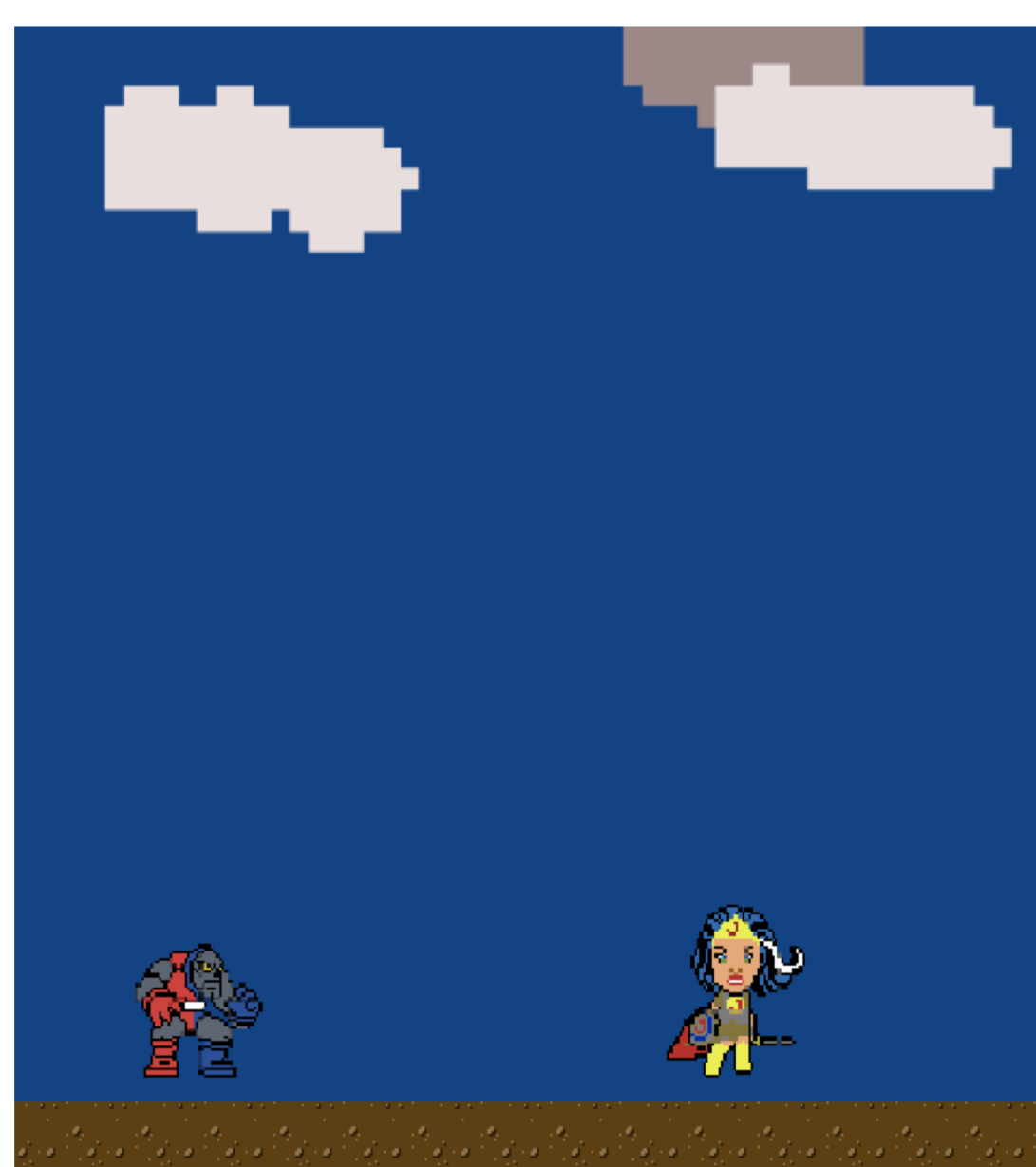
Results

The preliminary results of the research project were interesting. Based on pre-survey and post-survey data. There were some slight, but fascinating adjustments. One change that was noticeable was on the optional question of Ethnicity, in the beginning of the semester only 9 students volunteered to answer. The highest number of responses were "?" and "American" at 4 and 2 respectively. In the post-survey, 17 students volunteered to answer the question. With a much more diverse set of answers with numerous being very specific with responses such as "Filipino," "Mexican-American," and "Mixed." When asked about gender, one student was comfortable with actually writing "Trans" as a response. Over 50% of 40 respondents said that they understood the term "counter narrative" and said that "Critical Media Literacy Theory has changed their view of media."

In terms of participants, I noticed that more of my 8th graders were participating in the warm up discussions when we were discussing Critical Media Literacy than normal technical questions. During the course of the 6 weeks, my period 2 class which comprised of over half 8th graders saw 53 participants who shared total compared to my normal 6-week average of 12 when asked a technical question regarding coding. My other class which comprised of over half 7th graders saw marginal change with 25 participants compared to my usual 6-week average of 14.

When asked the question "If you had the opportunity to make a video game that could inspire others, what story would you like to tell and how would you tell it?" Some of my students actually gave answers that impressed me with their thoughtfulness. One student mentioned "A story of a girl that was lonely only one hard working parent and she bought her a dog that became her best friend." Another said they wanted to tell "A story about a kid from the ghetto and how he makes it to the top in street facing but goes to jail and loose everything."

The following is a screen shot of one project a student of mine submitted in the first semester of my class, compared to a student submission this semester:



Conclusions

Based on my data I have gathered during the 6 weeks of my project, it seems that I have come to a few preliminary conclusions.

1. Critical Media Literacy Theory can be a powerful tool to engage older students such as 8th graders, but for younger students they will require more scaffolding to have the right language to use prior to discussion.
2. While it did not impact all of my students, a few of my students did seem to feel more comfortable expressing who they are when asked about identity.
3. More of my students challenged themselves to try to genuinely create projects inspired by their own lives instead of taken from popular media whether it was in the form of just including characters named after family or friends or actually creating projects inspired by daily life such as the first day of school.