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I Suck at This Game: "Let's Play" Videos, Think-Alouds, and the Pedagogy of Bad Feelings

ABSTRACT

This article explores the pedagogical usefulness of "Let's Play" videos (LPs), a wildly popular paratext in which video gamers record and narrate their gameplay. I designed and implemented an LP creation assignment in two English Literature classes that focused on digital children's literature and culture. I imagined my LP assignment as a variation on a cognitive "think-aloud" activity, wherein students and/or instructors vocalize their approach to solving a particular problem. I was curious how these habits of mind might differ when students engage with interactive digital texts as opposed to print literature. What this study exposed is the centrality of feelings—in particular, "bad" feelings like anxiety and frustration, and the silences that often accompany these feelings—to the initial stages of critical thinking. When students contemplated bad feelings and their origins, eventually they were able to offer incisive analyses of their digital texts. Ultimately, this study argues that cognitive *and* affective "think-and-feel-aloud" activities such as the LP exercise, which allow students to dwell momentarily in bad feelings and silence, create rich teaching and learning opportunities.

KEYWORDS

scholarship of teaching and learning, Let's Play, video games, think-aloud, affect

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I describe and reflect upon an assignment that I implemented in a course on digital children's literature and culture. In particular, I focus on the unexpected ways in which bad feelings and silence shaped the class's experience. As a relative novice to the course topic, I wanted to think alongside my students about how studying digital texts requires attention to a set of formal features not typically examined in the English Literature classroom, including gameplay mechanics; sound and graphics; and interactivity.[1] I hoped to offer the class a variation on the "think-aloud," a cognitive exercise used across disciplines in which instructors and/or students verbally describe their approach to solving a particular problem, and then scrutinize the components of this approach (van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg 1994). As Linkon (2011) suggests, think-alouds "can help us identify the thinking habits that contribute to students' difficulties" and, when performed by instructors, can make more visible the analytical strategies informed by expert knowledge (111). When we engage with interactive, digital texts, I wondered, what are the habits of mind that we cultivate and deploy? What kind of assignment might surface some of these habits?

I ended up structuring the assignment around a well-known video game paratext[2] that I thought might mirror think-aloud processes: the "Let's Play" video (LP), in which a gamer records and narrates their experience playing a particular game. I asked my students to create two LPs, using the same digital

text of their choice, selected from the syllabus or chosen freely from elsewhere. The first LP, submitted at the beginning of term, was to be "blind," capturing their initial interaction with the text.[3] Their second, end-of-term "expert" LP was to build on the first, offering a thoughtful, scripted remix of their text using a narrative strategy of their choice (e.g. humor; expert insight; theoretical reading/interpretation; tips and tricks). Alongside each LP, students submitted a 500-word written response in which they informally reflected on the LP creation process, their interactions with their chosen text, and whether or not anything surprised them about the experience.

I taught two versions of this class (one graduate, one undergraduate) and, with student consent, collected and performed a thematic analysis of these assignments, searching in particular for evidence of emerging and recurring habits of mind. Following think-aloud protocol as described by van Someren, Barnard, and Sandberg (1994), I was interested in "obtain[ing] a model of the cognitive processes that take place during problem solving"—these assignments, which asked students to narrate, orally and in writing, "what goes through their head" when interacting with a digital text and creating an LP, served as my "raw data about cognitive processes" (8). Below, after providing more context for LPs and my assignment, I focalize my findings through two case studies, which illustrate the surprising roles of affect and silence in the LP-as-think-aloud.[4] As it turns out, *feeling* played just as important a part as *thinking*, indicating that the think-aloud might be conceived more usefully as a cognitive *and* affective exercise—a "think-and-feel-aloud," as I propose. A pedagogy of bad feelings, I maintain, can open avenues for critical thinking and problem solving in a variety of classes and disciplines.

LET'S PLAY: A SNAPSHOT

As Burwell and Miller (2016) point out, "LPs vary in length, content, and technical sophistication, but they almost always have two shared features: gameplay footage, accompanied with simultaneous commentary provided by the gamer" (110). The type of commentary varies from creator to creator and video to video. Some creators produce only blind LPs while others offer tips and tricks or demonstrate a skillful play-through or "speedrun" of a game. Some LPers play a game badly or ironically to make viewers laugh, a strategy adopted and popularized by late-night host Conan O'Brien in his "Clueless Gamer" (2019) series. "But in almost every case," Burwell and Miller indicate, "entertaining the audience is a priority" (110).

Such audiences are larger than one might initially expect. LPs are wildly popular—indeed, they make up some of the most popular content on the web. The scale of this popularity was brought into relief in September 2015, when news outlets reported that the first-ever person to receive 10 billion YouTube views was Felix Kjellberg, more widely known as "PewDiePie," a Swedish "video-game commentator" and "general-interest vlogger" who rose to fame by "uploading videos of himself playing horror games, which he would narrate in absurd, exaggerated ways" (Dewey 2015). In some cases, making LPs can be lucrative: Dewey reports that, in 2014 alone, Kjellberg's earnings were in excess of $7 million. Today, the digital game industry continues to grow and LPs remain very popular. A recent study revealed that more users are watching video game content on YouTube (517 million viewers) and live-streaming platform Twitch (185 million viewers) than the *combined* 325 million subscribers of HBO, Netflix, ESPN, and Hulu (Bailey 2017). In February 2020, worldwide spending on digital games totaled $9.2 billion (SuperData Staff 2020).

LPs have emerged in the context of what Jenkins (2006) calls "convergence culture," a concept that "describes a moment when fans are central to how culture operates" (1). As Jenkins explains,

"[n]ew technologies are enabling average consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" and "[p]owerful institutions and practices…are being redefined by a recognition of what is to be gained through fostering—or at least tolerating—participatory cultures" (1). This relationship between texts, fan production, cultural trends, and social/institutional forces informs much of the existing scholarship on LPs. There are a number of essays in legal journals, for example, about how LPs complicate definitions of "fair use" (Postel 2017; Vogele 2017). Cultural studies scholars have contextualized LPs using film history (Glas 2015), critiqued the capitalist exploitation of LP creators (Postigo 2014), and argued for the LP's subversive potential (Gekker 2018).

In the sole Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) piece on LPs to-date, Burwell and Miller (2016) investigate how LPs might be useful in literacy education. Drawing on Consalvo's (2007) argument about the "pedagogical functions" of gaming paratexts, these authors assert that LPs "activate a host of remix literacies" (122). They explain: "the range of practices associated with LPs (online discussion, shared and personal meaning-making, multimodal production, appropriation and critical decision-making) provide useful models for critical and creative engagement with games in literacy instruction" (122). Burwell and Miller conclude with a call for classroom-based research into LPs. It is the latter, in part, that this study sought to accomplish—to find out how, if at all, LPs might be useful in the context of a university-level course.

FINDINGS: THE LP AS "THINK-AND-FEEL-ALOUD"

I offered my first iteration of the LP assignment to a class of seven graduate (MA and PhD) English students in winter 2018. The second version took place later that year in a class of 12 upper-year undergraduate English majors (for a list of participants, see appendix).[5] The class, entitled "The Virtual Child," focused on a range of digital texts for young people as well as a theoretical and etymological history of the concept "virtual," including its non-digital iterations (we considered, for example, how *Peter Pan*'s Neverland is a kind of virtual space).[6] Generally speaking, the two classes shared a similar structure. Both graduate and undergraduate courses explored iPad fairy tale apps by Nosy Crow; digital picture book adaptations, including *My Very Hungry Caterpillar* (2018), *Pat the Bunny* (2016), and *The Monster at the End of This Book* (2011); video games with coming-of-age themes, such as *Broken Age* (2014) and *Never Alone: Ki Edition* (2016); and print literature that represents the relationship between young people and virtuality, including *Peter Pan* (Barrie 2011), *Ready Player One* (Cline 2011), Doctorow and Wang's graphic novel *In Real Life* (2014), and Whitehead's book of poetry *Full-Metal Indigiqueer* (2017).

Critical and theoretical readings in both classes included Shields (2002), Burwell and Miller (2016), Hamer's (2017) work on interactive picture books, some video game theory (Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca 2016), McGlotten's discussion of online intimacy (2013), Stockton's (2017) examination of queer children and video games, and an essay on fan culture by Tosenberger (2011). The graduate class featured additional theoretical readings, most notably Chun's (2016) work on the relationship between new media and bodily habit. These two courses were supported by a grant that provided each student with an iPad for the duration of the term. Students accessed our array of texts through the iPad, and they were able to use this device's screen and voice capture features to record their LPs.[7] The class culminated in a collectively organized interactive exhibit, open to the university community, where students shared a curated selection of their term work, including their LPs. Students also produced a written inquiry synthesis, modeled after Linkon's (2011) approach, in which they traced

the ways their habits of mind shifted over the duration of the term as they engaged with course texts and completed the LP assignment.

In preparation for the LP assignment, students read Burwell and Miller's (2016) study and, together, we viewed and discussed some sample LPs these authors examine, including a blind LP of *Journey* by ChristopherOdd (2013) and Lady Insanity's (2015) expert LP on *Dragon Age: Inquisition*. Students submitted their blind LP and response towards the beginning of the term, and their expert LP and response at the very end. My prompt for the blind LP was intentionally loose. As I wrote in the instructions,

> *It should capture your* first-ever *interaction with the text. Don't worry too much about saying the 'right' things. Try to adopt a relaxed, stream-of-consciousness style narration: say whatever happens to come to mind, in response to any aspect of the text as you navigate it for the first time. You won't be evaluated on what you do/don't say!*

In an attempt to keep the assignment low-stakes, I did not provide a rubric for assessment, nor did I discuss the learning outcomes for this assignment in-depth. Truthfully, I was very much experimenting with the assignment as I implemented it. This was likely an error since, as I will discuss, assessment ended up being a source of anxiety for everyone involved.

After both courses were complete, I reviewed each student's blind and expert LPs and their accompanying responses to consider what themes and ideas seemed to surface—and what, if anything, these themes and ideas might indicate about the habits of mind students adopt when engaging with digital texts. I found that LPs are indeed useful as think-aloud-style activities. The students' blind LPs in particular highlighted what Linkon (2011) describes as "the messier thinking that we go through before we reach conclusions" (53), which is the kind of strategic knowledge such activities are designed to both illuminate and foster. Most striking, however, was how the assignment demonstrated that "negative" or "bad" feelings such as anxiety and frustration are central to the process of reading and/or interactive play, interpretation, analysis, and learning in general.[8]

Certainly, I am not the first to point this out. A recent article cluster in *Pedagogy* (Ross and Dowland 2019), for example, argues for acknowledging and working with various classroom anxieties to reimagine our pedagogical uses of negative affect. Similarly, Knupsky and Caballero (2020) call classrooms "hotbeds of unacknowledged affect and insecurity," while arguing that "negative affect that we can explicitly talk about is negative affect we can learn from" (115-16). However, we often envision the think-aloud as a purely cognitive exercise, one that tends to emphasize, as Linkon (2011) writes, those "analytical strategies" and "critical choices" that shape our habits of mind (53). My LP assignment functioned more like a "think-and-feel aloud," one that made visible the pedagogical potential of bad feelings and the silences that sometimes attend them—feelings that are not unique to any particular discipline.

Of the 19 students across the two versions of "The Virtual Child," 14 made comments in their blind LP reflections about feeling various degrees of self-consciousness or anxiety while recording their gameplay. Students described themselves as feeling "awkward" (Hong and Arianna), "extremely-self conscious" (Dania) or "uncomfortable" (Laurel). Some felt "pressure" (Jacob) and "[worry] that I was performing incorrectly" in front of a "perceived audience of [my] peers and professor" (Student 3).[9]

Student 2 "was keenly aware that I was recording myself," while Kaelyn found her "focus" to be "less on the game and more so on myself as a performer."

Some students felt anxiety about finding the right things to say, an anxiety no doubt aroused by my assignment instructions that compelled them to speak. Hong, for example, wrote that "speaking, even to an invisible audience who doesn't exist in the temporal moment of the recording? That was hard." Other students felt self-conscious about their lack of gaming experience, as though they had insufficient skill to successfully complete the assignment. Emily felt obliged to out herself as a "non-gamer," while Student 3 remarked: "I…worried that I was performing incorrectly (especially considering my lack of connection with gaming/LP culture prior to this class)."[10] Moreover, as I will illustrate, frustration was a common affective theme—especially when it came to the blind LP.

In this regard, the LP assignment responds to a call made by Walsh (2019) in an essay on frustration and anxiety: "it is the role of the teacher," he writes, "to help students understand and work with these difficult emotional states" (519). Although our impulse might be to guide students beyond these feelings, Walsh maintains that "as instructors we should try to craft pedagogical approaches that are not just self-consciously aware of but also engaged in negative emotions" (519). The LP assignment, albeit unintentionally, accomplished just this: it made students frustrated and often anxiously silent, but also offered them space to use their feelings and silences as springboards for shrewd critical thought. The overall effect was a potent reminder that identifying, accepting, dwelling in, and thinking through the negative feelings associated with problem solving and analysis can yield thrilling and surprising pedagogical results.

Linkon (2011) writes that she first experimented with think-aloud activities "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" (53). As the LP assignment made clear, however, this process—especially when performed in front of colleagues—also involves no small quantities of fear and frustration, arguably for both experts and novices. Such "negative emotions are features of learning itself," argues Dowland (2019), "perhaps ones not to be so anxious about" (548). For the purposes of this essay, I focus on two case studies that I believe best demonstrate how the blind LP and its accompanying reflection raised productive questions and useful bad feelings that the students then pursued, often to great effect, in their second, expert LP.[11] This scaffolded dimension of the LP assignment was, in my view, its greatest success. Many students were able to take their LP-related feelings and turn them into astute analyses of a game's genre, themes, structure, formal aspects, and/or mechanics.[12] Moreover, the way silence operated in this assignment—through my students' anxieties about speaking, my anxieties about assessing relatively silent LPs, and how silence itself circulated in the LPs—indicated to me some of the most striking areas for improving future iterations of this assignment, and for refining my overall approach to teaching and learning.

Case 1: "Alright, Get Climbing!"

Undergraduate Student 1 chose to play the puzzle-platformer[13] *Celeste* (2018) for their LP assignment. On the surface, *Celeste* is the story of young woman, Madeline (the player-character), who is on a perilous journey to scale a gargantuan mountain. However, *Celeste* also deals with Madeline's struggles with anxiety and depression, which come to be embodied by the mountain metaphor. In Student 1's blind LP, they are obviously and repeatedly frustrated by the game's challenging mechanics. Impressively, however, Student 1 takes the frustration that they feel so acutely in the blind LP and

considers, in their expert LP, (1) *why* the game might want players to feel frustrated, at least occasionally; and (2) the significance of this frustration alongside the game's broader themes.

The first few minutes of their blind LP consist of Student 1 quietly experimenting and familiarizing themself with the controls, before eventually admitting, "the controls are a little weird for me, but we're getting there." In one, two-minute sequence of the video, Student 1 struggles to make a difficult jump over a series of spikes using the game's "dash" function (see figure 1). As Madeline, Student 1 repeatedly dies while trying (and failing) to grab a glowing gem that allows her to "reset" the dash and use it twice. This gem would enable Madeline to successfully complete the jump. As they struggle, Student 1 narrates:

> I don't know how I'm going to…[dies]. Oh! Does that, like, reset the dash? Is that what that does? Um, I think…no. Uhhhh…[dies]. [Whispers expletive, laughs]. I don't…alright…get climbing. Okay, okay, okay. [Dies]. No! This is so embarrassing, to be honest. Why can't I grab on… [Dies]. Is that wall, like, not climb-able? [Growls]. I'm getting so angry! [Dies]. I think it does reset my dash, so I just need to fall through and dash to the right. Okay. [Unintelligible]. [Dies]. Ugh! I keep…my fingers are so antsy to press the dash button, like, before I need to…[completes the jump]. There we go! I did it!

Figure 1. Madeline must make a series of challenging maneuvers in *Celeste* (copyright Matt Makes Games 2018)
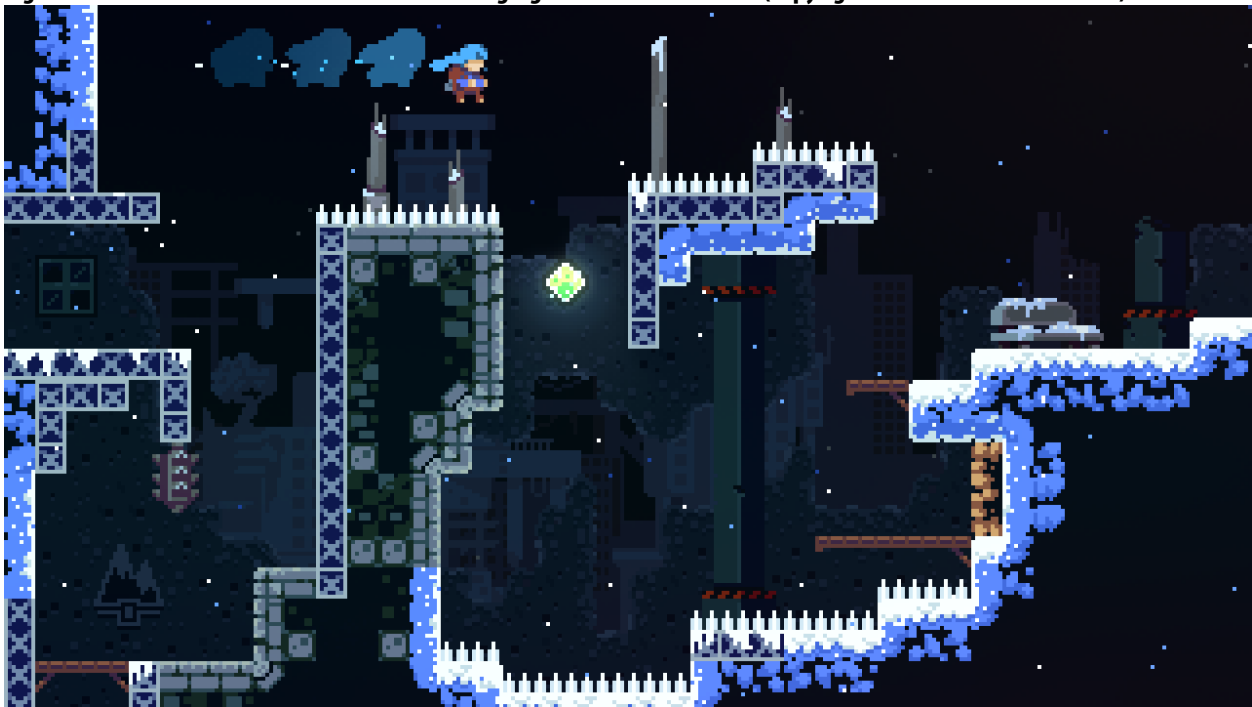
In their blind LP reflection, similar to other students, Student 1 writes that they were "acutely aware of the eventual audience that would be watching," and thus found themself "performing in ways that I wouldn't have otherwise." Although Student 1 notes that "I don't really think this ended up affecting my gameplay too much, because I would've sucked at this game regardless," they then indicate that the imagined classroom community became a vital and strategic part of their gameplay. They write:

"I…found myself talking through my approach to each screen, so that I was still communicating with the audience even while I wasn't doing anything, and I think this actually helped my process."

Student 1's eventual progress in the game begins feeling "hard-earned and super rewarding" to them. Astutely, Student 1 then reflects on these feelings and starts assembling a preliminary thesis about the game—an idea that would then become the foundation for their expert LP. They comment:

> I had to put serious work into going forward in this game, and I think that this is an instance where the mechanics…support the text of the game itself. The player has to earn their progression in the game in the same way that Madeline…must persevere to make her way up the mountain. This is a game about overcoming seemingly insurmountable odds (from what I know so far!) and the gameplay mirrors that idea.

By the time they submit their expert LP, Student 1 has built substantially on their idea that *Celeste*'s challenging and often frustrating mechanics work in concert with the game's protagonist, genre, and themes to produce meaning. The platformer genre creates a set of expectations, Student 1 explains in their expert LP, "of climbing higher and higher and going further and further," and this task "represents…the hardships for Madeline of living with and attempting to overcome her mental illness." As the game establishes, though, and as Student 1 observes, this task is non-linear and, ultimately, not achieved in as tidy a way as the player or Madeleine herself might like. Inspired by Anable's (2018) work on affect and video games, Student 1 theorizes how *Celeste*'s difficult mechanics, in the context of "a game where you play a character challenging a mental illness," produce "a sort of affect system." In their expert LP, Student 1 narrates:

> The emotional responses that [the game's mechanics] evoke, whether that is a seemingly endless frustration from dying over and over and over and over and over and over again, or the wave of triumph and sense of accomplishment after successfully completing a particularly difficult sequence, these things are designed to interface with the narrative experience of Madeline. So, in essence, the mechanics of the game encourage you to feel in a way that is comparable to a way that Madeline might be feeling at a given moment in the narrative…Your experience is intrinsically linked to hers through the affect system and the emotional resonances that are generated with the interactions between structure, mechanics, and textual elements.

As demonstrated by the blind LP, *Celeste*'s frustrations caused Student 1 to form a particular affective relationship to the game. The LP assignment asked them to narrate and reflect upon their gameplay in such a way that they were able to analyze how, why, and in what particular ways the game might, in fact, be strategically designed to make them feel. Ultimately, Student 1's feelings led them to formulate an argument about how the game itself functions as an affective structure. While the blind LP permitted the kinds of "messier" thinking—and feeling—vital to the initial phases of analysis, the expert LP was an opportunity for Student 1 to draw upon and assemble these feelings of frustration, satisfaction, and achievement into a coherent argument about *Celeste*.

Case 2: "Silence is a Valid Option"

In her blind LP of *The Wolf Among Us* (2014), a gritty Little-Red-Riding-Hood-noir action-adventure[14] game, undergraduate student Ashley barely speaks at all. In her reflection, Ashley describes feeling anxious while recording her LP for reasons similar to those of other students: she identified as an inexperienced gamer, and her gameplay was being recorded for viewing. Ashley writes:

> *The first thing I noticed was how aware I was of my inexperience with gaming and how this made me self-conscious and uncomfortable knowing my actions were being recorded. I found myself trying to make the game play more interesting for viewers by using humour, which helped to assuage my own discomfort. In my attempt to make the LP more interesting I wanted to say more than I expected and had more to say than I actually did.*

Ironically, *The Wolf Among Us* includes a prompt notifying players that, during moments of interactive dialogue with other characters, "silence is a valid option" (see figure 2). During my in-class explanation of the blind LP assignment, I stressed to students that their LPs did not need to contain wall-to-wall dialogue and that they could allow silences to surface naturally and often, if necessary. However, as I have already illustrated, a number of them flagged in their responses that they felt pressure to speak as much as possible—a result, no doubt, of the fact that I had to ultimately assess this assignment. How could I assess silence? I did not offer a grading rubric and my assignment instructions asked students to "adopt a relaxed, stream-of-consciousness style narration" in their LP voiceovers (but no pressure!). In her reflection, Ashley remarks:

> *Despite my desire for abundant dialogue…knowing I had an audience caused me to censor my dialogue by not swearing—despite the strong desire to—and only making some of the comments I wanted to make. My discomfort while making the LP was something that I had not expected, when I sat down to play I was excited, but once I began recording I got nervous.*

Truthfully, my own nerves surfaced when I sat down to grade Ashley's blind LP. How could I evaluate a video that contained little to no narration, especially since I was imagining the LP as a think-aloud? What could I do, in other words, if students did not think as loudly as I wanted them to? When I told students that silence is a valid option for this LP assignment, did I really mean it?

Figure 2. Silence is a valid option for Sheriff Bigby Wolf in *The Wolf Among Us* (copyright TellTale Games 2014)

The game's prompt, combined with Ashley's response to her own silences, urged me to reflect on my anxieties surrounding silence in the classroom. I turned to SoTL scholarship on silence, some of which resonated with what I was experiencing. Waite (2013) reminded me of things that I often take for granted in my teaching: that "class participation means talking in class, that class participation is good, that the best students will participate in class, that the best model for teaching…is a model where students talk out loud to the group" (63). Waite asks us, as educators, to consider the many kinds of silences that manifest in our classroom, and why they might do so. Waite also invites us to reflect on how many of us aspire to create classrooms that disrupt ostensibly oppressive ways of thinking, yet the ways in which we compel students to speak might reaffirm "just one more normative set of hoops through which students must jump" (p. 72). Was I too adamant in the way I compelled students to speak? Was I afraid of how I might have to adjudicate their silences?

In her study of quiet students, Reda (2009) points out that we often interpret student silence in limited ways: "hostility, passiveness, resistance, lack of preparation" (2). "Students who choose not to speak are described through a rhetoric of failure," she explains; "these students are seen by what they do not do rather than by what they choose to do" (7). Reda encourages us to avoid resorting to such negative interpretations of silence, imagining instead how "silence might be understood more accurately as a learning style, an opportunity for intellectual work through "internal dialogue." Silence can invite students to weigh competing positions, construct theories and arguments that reflect their values, and put into words that which does not feel already articulated" (19). Ultimately, Reda argues, we need to develop more capacious ways for thinking about the function and value of silence in the classroom.

In Ashley's reflection, she interpreted her own silence as a kind of anxious failure; she was not a seasoned gamer, and therefore she did not know what to say. Her nerves, in other words, got the best of and silenced her. Just as Student 1 reimagined their relationship to frustration, however, Ashley's

perspective on silence shifted when she created her expert LP. Drawing on a course reading by Hamer (2017) in her second reflection, Ashley writes:

> [Hamer] prompted me to question the playability and the 'opportunities for interactivity and participation offered' in the game [64]. I began to notice the limits that were placed on my ability to interact with the NPCs [non-player characters]…and my ability to participate in the game's storyline. Hamer discusses the ability to co-create a story when it is adapted into a game, but I did not feel like a co-creator, I felt constrained and limited by the app programming which dictated a particular storyline and provided limited choices…Making this LP was a surprisingly different experience than making the blind LP. I found myself pausing to allow the noises of the game to be heard (unlike my blind LP in which the silence made me uncomfortable).

Instead of seeing silence as an anxiety driven personal lack, Ashley considers how and when the game allows her to speak; she begins interpreting her silence as an effect of the game's "loudness." Ashley observes that the game does not allow much space for player agency or decision-making, and the game's constant flow of character dialogue works alongside its relatively severe narrative constraints and limitations. She redirects her initial discomfort into an assessment of when, in her words, "I could speak without disrupting the course of the game." Ashley moves from interpreting her silence using what Reda (2009) calls a "rhetoric of failure," and begins to see it as "an opportunity for intellectual work" (7, 19). Far from evidence of failure on Ashley's part, silence becomes valuable in that it directs her to think about how and where the game offers its players freedom of choice—if at all.

In the final minutes of her expert LP, Ashley pushes her analysis a step further to consider the larger implications of how, in the game, she often found herself "forced down a [narrative] path I didn't choose." Noting again that *The Wolf Among Us* is an adaptation of the "Little Red Riding Hood" folktale, Ashley reminds her viewers that "folk and fairy tales were written as moral tales to teach children…[children] were encouraged to act certain ways. Kind of like in the game…you're forced into making certain choices, you're forced to follow a particular path." Despite its adult themes, Ashley points out, *The Wolf Among Us* still behaves like children's literature. Similar to how Rose (1993) famously characterizes children's literature, *The Wolf Among Us* wants to "secure the reader to its intent and…be absolutely sure of its effects" (2).

Ashley's LPs challenged me, in Waite's (2013) words, "to come face to face with my fears about silence and what it means" (69). I realized that I need to take the role of silence in future iterations of the LP assignment seriously, and in the classroom more generally. "The questions I am asking my students," to borrow again from Waite, "may require silence—or…silence may even be the answer to the question" (69). In Ashley's case, to be sure, silence was an integral part of her answer.

CONCLUSION: ON FEELINGS, FAILURES, AND FUTURE STRATEGIES

Overall, the LP assignment succeeded in familiarizing students with a paratext that has become central to video game culture, inviting them to participate actively in creating such paratexts, and setting the stage for a robust inquiry that allowed them to build on and analyze the significance of their initial blind LP—including the bad feelings that this LP often surfaced. Indeed, as Holmes and Gee (2016) maintain, "the process of knowledge construction is enhanced when learners are required to express their ideas in the form of tangible artifacts that are shared with other people" (12). Having students

document and reflect upon their feelings while playing a game—those feelings expressed both aloud and through silence—provided them with useful preliminary material for eventual analysis.

My think-aloud hypothesis was relatively accurate in this regard, and student expert LPs typically built on ideas generated in their blind LPs. As Jacob postulates in his blind LP reflection, the LP

> *could almost be seen as a notebook in which one records their ongoing experience with a…text, as do books with marginalia. I can imagine someone then using and extrapolating from the Let's Play; it becomes a reservoir of critical material to draw from, noting the emotional points of a video.*

In this sense, the two LP assignments provided what Linkon (2011) calls "cognitive scaffolding," which can "guide students through the process of exploring an issue or text, suggesting not just an initial question, but also strategies for considering multiple angles, testing hypotheses, and developing ideas" (41). As Jacob signals, the "emotional points" of a given LP emerged as unexpectedly useful angles of inquiry.

Other students produced results that paralleled Student 1 and Ashley's analytical trajectories. In the reflection on her blind LP of *Never Alone: Ki Edition* (2016), which features a series of deaths and failures, Maryam noted: "I became genuinely frustrated and less immersed in…the game as I continued to fail." In her expert LP reflection, however, Maryam explains how these failures became useful to her analysis of *Never Alone,* a game created in partnership with Indigenous Alaskan storytellers: "I ended up considering the comedic effects found through repeated failure. I postulated that this could be a means in which Indigenous audiences partake in healing and bridging social and virtual communities together through laughter." In their expert LP of *Broken Age*, designed to offer tips and tricks for playing the game, Student 2 took an approach similar to Ashley's, explaining: "I also wanted to show how frustrated I was with the game at times due to the lack of flexibility and creativity the player has when it comes to solving the puzzles." Although most students produced what I call "video game essay" style expert LPs, such as Student 1 and Ashley—that is, they played while offering some kind of theoretical perspective, drawn from course themes and readings, on the game—some students opted for satire, speed running, or a "tips and tricks" style video (see appendix).

In any future iterations, I would modify this assignment and its delivery in ways that I have distilled into three points, all of which reflect how this assignment has influenced my pedagogy more generally. These ideas, I believe, are applicable across assignments and disciplines:

1. In her expert LP reflection, Emily commented: "I appreciate the Let's Plays that allow for mistakes and explanations; such content allows viewers like myself to learn alongside these [LP] creators, establishing a narrative around video games that they are meant to be played, not mastered." This reinforced for me that failure is integral to LP creation, video gaming, and learning in general. Juul (2013), in fact, argues that what distinguishes video games from other media is that games allow us to securely experiment with and experience failure: "the feeling of escaping failure (often by improving our skills) is central to the enjoyment of games" (7). Failing is not only permitted in video games, it is necessary to learning a game's rules and mechanics. "[G]ood games," Juul explains, "tend to offer well-defined goals and clear feedback" to enable our progress and improvement (10). Given that a number of students expressed so much anxiety about their ostensible level of gaming skill, I would carve out class time to discuss the relationship between gaming, learning, and failure. I would emphasize to students that I expect them to fail, possibly many times, in their LPs. What becomes interesting is how they feel

about and respond to their failures. As Gee (2007; 2013) explores, providing a safe space for failure and subsequent improvement makes for good pedagogy in any discipline.

2. In both versions of the class, I encouraged students to script their expert LPs. In the second, undergraduate iteration, I asked students to submit those scripts. Students who adhered too closely to an "essay" model—or who over-scripted their LPs—found themselves not creating enough space for silence and juggling their narration with the active play and attention that games demand. As Laurel remarks in her expert LP reflection:

> In hindsight, it would have been perhaps better to create more of a loose script that would have been more open to improvisation, as it turned out to be quite difficult to read and keep track of my place while also interacting with the app. It was a bit like giving a presentation while also playing a video game.

Other students shared similar experiences. In their expert LP reflection, Student 3 notes:

> I had too much to say in such a limited amount of time and as a result my LP came across in an unnatural and very scripted way. The best moments in my LP are ones where I allowed myself to speak naturally without the pressure of getting everything in as I [had] typed it out for myself.

Similarly, Kaelyn found that "instead of allowing myself the time to pause and think through my reaction I rushed myself for the sake of a more entertaining video," while Oreoluwa noted the benefits of a slimmer script: "after every iteration my script became shorter and less complex, until it was just a skeleton with dad jokes and tricks here and there, and very few verbatim lines. But I think this was for the best."

So, I would stress to students that silence is not only permitted, but expected in their LPs. Silence is often just as significant and meaningful as speech, and it offers an opportunity to think about the various forms that knowledge can take in any classroom. I would adapt the language in my assignment instructions to encourage students to speak only when they feel the impulse; otherwise, they are free to remain silent and focus on their gameplay. Their task in the reflections will be to indicate what was happening in their silences, and why they believe those silences were taking place.

3. In his blind LP reflection, Jacob speculates that an LP may "demonstrate what happens to a player with the added pressure of an audience." Indeed, as we have seen, this "added pressure" is something that many students felt. Sweeney, West, Groessler, Haynie, Higgs, Macaulay, Mercer-Mapstone, and Yeo (2017) find that, when it comes to technology-enhanced assessment, there is "a need for students to know the purpose of the assessment and be well-versed in the technology that supports it" (13). In future versions of the class, I would continue to clarify my step-by-step technical instructions for students unfamiliar with video recording (see note 7). I would also make more explicit the purpose of the LP assignment as it relates to (1) transforming the classroom into an "affinity group" (Gee 2007, 35) focused on experiencing and thinking through those shared feelings of frustration that arise when learning something new; and (2) the relevance of creating video game paratexts and acquiring "remix literacies" (Burwell and Miller 2016) in the context of a class on young people's participatory cultures. By clarifying the intention of the LP assignment further, students might assume the challenge with a willingness to anxiously experiment, fail, and be frustrated, knowing that anxiety,

failure and frustration are, in fact, part of the point. As Ross and Dowland (2019) suggest, anxiety could become "the spark that ignites the act of learning for our students" (512). Those places where we get stuck and feel frustrated, in a class on any topic, are likely those places that we should think about most deeply.

My primary takeaway from the LP assignment—that dwelling with bad feelings can lead to rich analysis—can be applied to classrooms that are not necessarily engaging with digital texts and video games. The principles of the LP-as-think-and-feel-aloud, that is, could be adapted for an array of assignments and a variety of texts. Linkon (2011) suggests the same: "Whether in a video or audio recording or in writing, individually or in small groups, variations on the think-aloud can capture much of what our students are thinking as they work with texts" (114). Equally important, of course, is what students are *feeling* as they encounter these texts. Arianna's expert LP on the interactive novel *Creatures Such As We* (2014, see appendix) is a strong example of an LP format that could also be suitable for any print-based material. Instructors in disciplines including, but not limited to, literature might also consider mining BookTube communities for think-aloud/LP-influenced assignment ideas.[15]

The LP assignment presented a number of frustrations, but also many pleasures. In their reflections, in addition to confessing their anxieties, some students shared positive comments about the LP creation process. Student 3 notes: "Before this course I'd never dreamt of making gaming content. This course has without a doubt broadened my scope of interest and study to include video game content and culture." Echoing Isbister's (2016) emphasis on "pride" as an emotion uniquely associated with gaming, Oreoluwa remarks about her experience with *Fortnite* (2017): "I'm a bit proud of myself for progressing so far into the game!" Arianna explains that, prior to our class, "I've never had any inclination to make videos, much less video essays, but this was a tremendous amount of fun to think about." From my perspective as an instructor, the LP assignment challenged me to consider the fundamental roles of bad feelings and silence as they relate to teaching and learning with digital texts— and teaching and learning in general. It pushed me to be thoughtful in my assignment design and nuanced in my assessment. It helped students cultivate their remix literacies. It produced anxiety and frustration, but in a way that helpfully clarified how think-aloud-style exercises can illuminate not only cognitive techniques, but also useful emotional responses. And—at the risk of sounding trite—it was also a lot of fun.

Child"—for sharing their brilliance with me so enthusiastically during our time together, and for their willingness to indulge my many pedagogical experiments and participate in this study. Paul Meunier and Emily Treppenhauer also provided research support for this project, and Paul was a most excellent teaching assistant in the undergraduate iteration of the class. This study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculty Research Ethics Board.

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NOTES

1. The last decade has seen an increase in research on "game-based teaching and learning (GBTL)" (Holmes and Gee 2016) and the various pedagogical affordances of video games and other digital texts. To provide a handful of examples: Gee (2007; 2013) has written extensively on how well-designed video games model effective pedagogy, and Dikkers (2016) has explored how the video game "quest" offers a useful course design framework; numerous scholars have composed and collected essays on GBTL (Arnseth et al. 2019; Blumberg 2014; Brown 2015; Manresa and Real 2016; Squire 2011; Steinkeuhler, Squire, and Barab 2012); and, more broadly, the concept of the "serious game" has emerged to categorize games "created with the intention to entertain and to achieve at least one additional goal (e.g., learning or health)" (Dörner et al. 2016, 3).

2. Citing Consalvo (2007), Burwell and Miller (2016) explain: gaming "paratexts include both corporately produced materials (such as guidebooks, cheatbooks, and mod chips) and user generated content (such as fan art, wikis, FAQs and reviews). [Consalvo] argues that paratexts are frequently more central to the experience of game play than games themselves" (110).

3. In gaming culture, a "blind run" commonly refers to a player's very first attempt at a particular game, executed with limited or no knowledge of how to play. A "blind run LP" or "blind LP" is the Let's Play video that captures this attempt.

4. Following Hutchings (2000), I pursue the SoTL question "what is?" as it relates to the LP assignment—my essay "is aimed not so much at proving (or disproving) the effectiveness of a particular approach or intervention but describing *what it looks like*, what its constitutive features might be" (4). I use this question to think through how bad feelings and silence might offer a "conceptual framework for shaping thought about practice" (5).

5. These courses took place at the University of Calgary, a commuter school with over 30,000 enrolled graduate and undergraduate students. The city of Calgary has a population of approximately 1.2 million people, and is located on Treaty 7 territory in southern Alberta. While the graduate class had a relatively average number of enrolled students (these classes are capped at 12 students, but generally have around seven to 10 registered), the undergraduate seminar was comparatively small, given that they are typically capped at 25. For this particular section of the class, I requested a cap of 15 students due to the limited number of iPads I was able to loan.

6. See Shields (2002) for a thorough overview of the history and etymology and various theories of "virtual."

7. The iPad's built-in screen and voice capture function proved unreliable. In some cases, it was nearly impossible to hear the student's recorded voice over the in-game music and sound. We also found that exporting the iPad-recorded files to YouTube somehow eliminated the student's recorded voice; this was resolved by processing the file through the free app *Splice* before uploading. In the second version of the class, I offered the students refined technical instructions; many of them opted to use other video editing software, such as iMovie, to create LPs with better audio. For students capturing non-iOS games, free, open source software is available at https://obsproject.com/.

8. I will avoid offering detailed theories of affect and emotion in this paper. For more, see Walsh (2019), who uses Ngai's theory of "ugly feelings" to think through the relationship between frustration, anxiety, and pedagogy.
9. Students have been identified according to the preference indicated on their project consent forms. Most students asked to have their work attributed to their real name. Students 1-3 requested anonymity and did not wish to be identified by a pseudonym.
10. Although this study was not designed to assess how gender might affect a student's relationship to gaming, I feel it noteworthy that it was mostly women who commented on their lack of experience with games or their insecurities about gaming. As Shaw (2014) explores, women and girls have been systematically marginalized from mainstream gamer culture, and this may have influenced— consciously or not—how some women in my class felt about being asked to record their gameplay for consumption by their colleagues and me.
11. To view a selection of LPs from the two classes, including these case studies, see appendix.
12. Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca (2016) define "mechanics" as "the rules and basic code of a game. "Mechanics" refers to the vast amount of information that goes into constructing the world of the game—the series of algorithms, for example, that determine the reaction pattern of a computer-controlled character" (64).
13. A "platformer" is an action game subgenre in which players must jump from platform to platform, dodging/fighting enemies and occasionally solving small puzzles, in order to progress. The classic example is Nintendo's *Super Mario Bros*. According to Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca (2016), such games "make high demands on the player's reflexes and coordination skills" (63).
14. "Adventure games," write Egenfeldt-Nielsen, Smith, and Tosca (2016), require "deep thinking and great patience. Typically, the player is represented by an individual character involved in a plot of mystery or exploration, and faces puzzles of various kinds" (70). Although these authors maintain that adventure games are "entirely devoid of fighting and action sequences," action-adventure games (like *The Wolf Among Us*) incorporate events requiring timely responses from the player (70).
15. See Ehret, Boegel, and Manuel-Nekouei (2018) for an essay on BookTube and the affect of participatory cultures.

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APPENDIX: STUDENTS, GAMES, LP STYLES, AND SAMPLE LPS
Sample LPs, where available, are hyperlinked in the charts below.

"The Virtual Child," Winter 2018, Graduate Seminar

Student	LP game (click for blind LP)	Expert LP style
Stephen Bauhart	*Darklands* (1992)	Tips & tricks
Dania Idriss	*Little Red Riding Hood* (2014)	Video game essay
Paul Meunier	*Never Alone: Ki Edition* (2016)	Video game essay
Hong Nguyen-Sears	*Creatures Such as We* (2014)	Video game essay
Laurel Sherriff	*WuWu & Co.* (2015)	Video game essay
Emily Treppenhauer	*Never Alone: Ki Edition* (2016) (blind), *Roblox* (2005) (expert)	Played game alongside a child
Shuyin Yu	*My Very Hungry Caterpillar* (2018)	Comedy/satire

Note. All students were MA level other than Paul, a PhD student.

"The Virtual Child," Fall 2018, Upper-Year Undergraduate Seminar

Student	LP game (click for blind LP)	Expert LP style
Student 1	*Celeste* (2018)	Video game essay
Student 2	*Broken Age* (2014)	Tips & tricks
Student 3	*Inside* (2017)	Tips & tricks
Arianna Alcaraz	*Creatures Such as We* (2014)	Video game essay
Ashley Anderson	*The Wolf Among Us* (2014)	Video game essay
Oreoluwa Arowobusoye	*Fortnite* (2017)	Tips & tricks/comedy
Jacob Bews	*Harry Potter: Hogwarts Mystery* (2018)	Comedy/satire
Kaelyn Macauley	*Seasons After Fall* (2016)	Played game alongside a child
Maryam Gowralli	*Never Alone: Ki Edition* (2016)	Video game essay
Chantal Gustafson-Schneider	*My Very Hungry Caterpillar* (2018)	Video game essay
Bryce Lanz	*Broken Age* (2014)	Speed run
Nazer Muhmoodullah	*Little Red Riding Hood* (2014) (blind), *Bionicle* (2003) (expert)	Tips & tricks