Digital Decodings: Learning in a Freirean Gaming Circle

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ABSTRACT

Digital Decodings: Learning in a Freirean Gaming Circle

Ian Seth McPhail

This action research study explores the use of video games in a Freirean culture circle. Video games are a popular media format enjoyed by many that can provide rich opportunities for learning. Following Paulo Freire's methodology of *conscientization*, I designed and facilitated a project called *Digital Decodings*, where a small group of adult learners decoded themes embedded in popular role-playing video games over five weekly sessions. Digital Decodings was an educational space where frameworks began to shift, conscientization deepened, and participants were exposed to new ways of thinking. Working with video games provided unique decoding opportunities; however, technical difficulties sometimes got in the way. It was also challenging to balance the *fun* of working with video games with the *focus* required to facilitate critical discussions. That said, the findings of this thesis support the potential of popular video games for emancipatory learning, nonetheless. Further research is needed on the role that different video games, or different video game genre*s* altogether, could play in future gaming circles. The exploratory nature of this study also paves the way for further exploration with different learner groups and educational methods.

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RÉSUMÉ

Décodages numériques: Apprendre dans un cercle de jeux vidéo freirien

Ian Seth McPhail

Cette recherche-action explore l'utilisation des jeux vidéo dans un cercle de culture freirien. Le jeu vidéo est un format médiatique populaire apprécié par plusieurs pouvant offrir de riches opportunités d'apprentissage. En suivant la méthodologie de conscientisation de Paulo Freire, j'ai conçu et animé un projet intitulé *Décodages numériques*, où un petit groupe d'apprenants adultes ont décodé des thèmes intégrés dans des jeux vidéo de rôle populaires au cours de cinq séances hebdomadaires. Décodages numériques était un espace éducatif où les cadres de référence ont commencé à évoluer, la conscientisation s'est approfondie et les participants ont été exposé à de nouvelles façons de penser. Travailler avec les jeux vidéo a offert des opportunités de décodage uniques; cependant, des difficultés techniques se sont parfois mises en travers. Il a aussi été difficile de trouver un équilibre entre le plaisir de travailler avec les jeux vidéo et la concentration nécessaire pour faciliter les discussions critiques. Cela dit, les résultats de ce mémoire soutiennent toutefois le potentiel des jeux vidéo populaires pour l'apprentissage émancipateur. Des recherches supplémentaires sont nécessaires sur le rôle que différents jeux vidéo, ou d'autres *genres* de jeux vidéo tout court, pourrait jouer dans de futurs cercles de culture. La nature exploratoire de cette étude ouvre également la porte à d'autres recherches avec différents groupes d'apprenants et méthodes pédagogiques.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the participants of Digital Decodings: Feivel, Kade, Terri, and Willow. I couldn't have done this without you.

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Introduction

Walk into any educational studies class, conference, or conversation, and it shouldn't take long before somebody mentions Paulo Freire. His seminal text, "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (2000), is widely regarded for popularizing critical education, which bridges emancipatory action with educational theory. A core tenet of Freirean pedagogy requires adapting his methods to one's own cultural context without losing a revolutionary spirit. As an educator inspired by Freire, I am often thinking about ways to engage learners in my own communities to move towards our mutual liberation. I believe video games may offer an interesting path forward.

The majority of Canadians are reported to play video games regularly, averaging nearly 8 gameplay hours per week (Entertainment Software Association of Canada, 2022). I am no stranger to these findings, if anything, I reckon I spend a fair bit more time gaming than this national average. Yet even I have a hard time wrapping my head around the hold video games have on the world entertainment industry. Various estimates have placed the global revenue of the gaming industry to be nearly *double* that of both the music and film industries *combined* (Arora, 2023; Thompson, 2023), falling only behind the TV sector (Schudey et al., 2023). Although the debate still rages on as to whether video games might be considered *art* (Ebert, 2010; Gershon, 2022; Parker, 2018), one thing is for certain: video games are *popular*.

Educational theorists have long been grappling with the role that popular culture can, and *should,* play in critical education (Buckingham, 1998; Giroux & Simon, 1989; Jubas et al., 2020; Morrell, 2002). Today, there is a substantial body of literature on the benefits and challenges of working with various forms of popular media, such as movies (T. Brown, 2011; Charlebois, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Faidley, 2021; Morrell, 2002; Ross et al., 2011; Stuckey & Kring,

2007; Tisdell, 2008; Venegas et al., 2021), TV shows (Faidley, 2021; Fink & Foote, 2007; Guy, 2007; Happel-Parkins & Esposito, 2015; Jubas, 2023; Liang, 2021), and music (Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Faidley, 2021; Kelly & Currie, 2021; Lewis, 2020; Moody-Ramirez & Scott, 2016; Morrell, 2002; Shevock, 2015; Shumway, 1989) to encourage critical reflection in different educational settings. Much less seems to be known, however, on the use of popular *video games* in critical education.

This is not to say there is a lack of critical scholarship on video games — on the contrary, there is a significant global community of critical games scholars that continues to grow (Coopilton, 2022; Tafari, 2024). That said, Freirean research in game studies tends to focus on the creation of new games rather than utilizing existing, popular games to build critical thought (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Coopilton, 2022, 2023; Flanagan, 2009; Frasca, 2001; Jackson, 2022; Oliveira Serpa & Mazzarotto, 2024; Tafari, 2024). This is important work; however, it won't replace the existing popular games, and gaming culture, that have served to reinforce hegemonic values for decades (Bergstrom, 2022; Boudreau, 2022; Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023; Fron et al., 2007). There are forms of liberatory social action that can come from critically examining, or what Freire would call *decoding*, games that are still popular *now.*

A Freirean pedagogical approach that has "resisted the test of time and geographic boundaries" (Souto-Manning, 2010, p. 8) is the *culture circle*. A typical culture circle uses a "coded situation", or *codification*, as a starting point to get a group of people talking about a shared experience. The codification can be any media that's familiar to the group, like a photograph, a scene from a movie, or even part of a video game. In the culture circle, participants react to the chosen media —the codification— together in a democratic group discussion. A *problem-posing* facilitator is present to listen to the discussion and keep it moving

with various questions.

The facilitator usually starts with questions that ask participants to *describe* the codification, like: “what do you see?” or “what is happening in this situation?”. As the group gets comfortable conversing together, the facilitator begins to encourage the group to “relate the situation to their own lives” (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011, p. 11). The questions get more personal, prompting participants to “externalize a series of sentiments and opinions about themselves, the world, and others” (Frere, 2000, p. 118). Once enough trust in the group has been built, the facilitator can then challenge participants to reflect on the personal and historical factors that inform their opinions. The goal of this decoding exercise is for people to reach a “perception of their previous perception” (Freire, 2000, p. 115) and gain awareness of their consciousness. This is what Freire called *conscientização*, often translated to “conscientization” or “critical consciousness” or in English.

The facilitator plays a major role in moving the group towards conscientization (Jubas et al., 2020; Laman et al., 2012; Sanches, 2022; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). That said, some codifications are easier to work with than others (Burstow, 1989; Egan-Simon, 2020; Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011; Lane et al., 2015; Lister, 1994; E. Tisdell et al., 2007). Both the media format, as well as the specific media titles chosen, can impact the decoding experience (Jubas, 2023; Kelly & Currie, 2021; Lane et al., 2015; Venegas et al., 2021).

Video games can provide especially unique decoding opportunities due to their interactive and multimodal nature (de Albuquerque & Ainsworth, 2013; Love, 2017). In role-playing video games (RPGs), for example, players actively participate in quests, often making moral decisions or engaging in in combat. These coded situations are shaped not only by each games’ narrative, but by players’ own experiences of control and agency as they interact with the

game's interface.

Although a few scholars have discussed ways in which videogames can be used as codifications with problem-posing methods, there has been very little empirical follow-up. The research that does exist is either theoretical in nature (Egan, 2019; McLaughlin, 2012), or focusses specifically on the experiences of game designers (Coopilton, 2023; Flanagan et al., 2007).

Research Purpose and Questions

To address this gap in the literature, I developed and facilitated a Freirean "gaming circle", which I called *Digital Decodings.* This action-research project aimed to shed light on the benefits of challenges of using video games in a dialogic group setting inspired by Freire's culture circle. A small group of adult participants and I met for a few hours, once a week, for five weeks, to decode a variety of popular role-playing video games in a non-formal environment. The goal was to see whether these video games could be useful in deepening conscientization.

In running the gaming circle, I had the following research question in mind:

How do adult learners experience video game decoding exercises in a non-formal Freirean learning environment?

More specifically, I wanted to see if certain video games, or elements within specific video games, were more conducive to meaningful problem-posing dialogue. I also had a secondary interest in seeing if there were any notable skills that a facilitator might need to effectively facilitate a video game-based culture circle.

Lastly, I would be remiss if I didn't highlight an equally important, yet more personal, goal of this project: to spend time doing something I really enjoy (playing video games).

Thesis Plan

This thesis is divided into five main chapters. Chapter One contextualizes my research subject, grounding it in both my lived experience as well as that of Paulo Freire. Chapter Two provides a review of the existing literature that relates to my research questions. This literature review starts with a wide overview of applied Freirean education, narrows into popular media education and critical media literacy, and concludes with a portrait of the critical gaming literature. Chapter Three details my research framework as well as my methodology, including how the Digital Decodings was designed. Chapter Four presents a narrative retelling of Digital Decodings' six sessions and Chapter Five presents my thematic findings. Finally, the Conclusion highlights the implications and significance of my research, discusses opportunities for future research, and ends on a personal, reflexive note.

Chapter 1: Context

In “Reinventing Pedagogy of the Oppressed”, an anthology of 21st century re-imaginings of Freire’s iconic text, Martin-Young (2020) begins her chapter with a clear assertion: “any discussion of Paulo Freire must begin with a look at his roots” (p. 85). I wholeheartedly agree and would like to turn that sentiment towards myself as well. Before diving into my literature review, I would like to contextualize both my and Freire’s lives to demonstrate the impetus behind my research topic.

My Perspective

Family legend has it that I was born with a Game Boy in my hands. My mother had been a “gamer” long before I was born and metaphorically passed her passion for video games onto me in utero. Indeed, some of my earliest and most formative childhood memories are of playing video games with my family. A lover of many genres, I’ve spent my life immersed in role-playing games, first-person shooters, racing games, dungeon crawlers, farming simulators, sandbox designers, and playing card emulators. I have other hobbies, too. I like to draw and play the drums. Yet nothing comes close to the impact that video games have had on my life.

I have so often heard of video games referred to as a tool of escapism, yet this couldn’t be further from my experience. Most games I’ve played — and continue to choose to play (even after finishing this research) — uncritically present colonial ways of knowing and being that reinforce racist and sexist ideals, as well as discrimination towards people of gender and sexual minority groups, (dis)abilities and classes. This, for me, is nothing to escape to. Bearing witness to the mirror of subjugation is not my idea of a good fantasy. So why do I still play?

As I’ve gotten older, I’ve found my love for video games come to have less to do with

the actual games themselves, and more with the dialogical communities I've built around them. Don't get me wrong, I'm still a sucker for all the flashy lights, the cycles of intermittent reinforcement, the massive dopamine hit that comes from winning a good fight. Yet I also love to *think*, and more than anything, I love to think with others. Which is what I've spent most of my adult life doing with my friends and communities: unpacking our wicked desires and looking at them closely. What is in us that drives us towards wanting to fight, and win, so badly? *Why* do we still play?

Over the years, I've had countless discussions with friends, some I've known for decades, some for days, about our shared and different ways of experiencing what we believe our games are trying to tell us, and in return, what we tell ourselves about the games we play. Our *praxis* if you will, of not just thinking about games in isolation, but dialoguing about them together and letting our collective understandings shape the ways we go out and interact with the world. I've found most of these discussions to be deeply interesting. Others have profoundly changed my life.

I must acknowledge my unique upbringing in the matter: having grown up in a household full of games that were always played communally, I've developed a rather uncommon understanding of video games as being just a part of a larger social experience. Still, I've felt lonely in my ways of knowing and doing. When I joined the MA in Educational Studies, this epistemic loneliness had become so deeply engrained in how I defined myself as a person that I was convinced nothing could shake it. Then, I read Freire.

Reading Freire was like reaching out to an old friend who would listen yet never hesitate to challenge me on what might not be true. A friend who knew how to explore matters of the heart. Sometimes I wonder if Freire ever felt alone too in his understanding of dialogue as central

to “the social and not merely the individualistic character of the process of knowing” (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 379). I know I certainly have. Sometimes I still do. Yet now when I do, I think of Freire, and of all the people I’ve met who’ve also been touched by his work. I hope he is resting peacefully, knowing that he is still building community decades after his passing.

Paulo Freire

This section draws from three main sources: *Letters to Cristina: Reflections on My Life and Work* (1996) and *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2014), both of which are written by Freire directly, as well as *Reading Paulo Freire: His Life and Work* (1994), written by one of Freire’s close collaborators, Moacir Gadotti. Information taken from other sources is cited accordingly.

Early Life

The foundation of Paulo Freire’s work lies in the violence of hunger. Born in 1921 to a loving family in Recife, Brazil, Freire’s early childhood was shaped by middle-class comforts. His experiences with food scarcity “arrived unannounced and unauthorized” as the Great Depression hit Northeast Brazil in 1929 (Freire, 1996, p. 15). While his family’s class status helped them borrow money to survive, it also kept them from taking on “lower-class” work, which was considered unacceptable for a middle-class family.

Although Freire’s hunger was less intense than that of his poorer classmates, it still greatly affected his performance in school. His studies emphasized rote memorization — what Freire would later come to call a “banking” concept of education — and Freire struggled to keep up. What his hunger didn’t affect, however, was his ability to develop a keen expertise in picking fruit from other people’s backyards. Being a middle-class kid may have prevented him from

finding work, but it also kept him from being suspected as a thief. His unique situation, at the intersection of privilege and hardship, kept him hungry enough to be in solidarity with the poor, yet regulated enough to be in a "constant search for understanding." (Freire, 1996, p. 28). He began to understand the plight of his lower-class peers who knew not only an even deeper hunger but also lived in a world that constantly censured their intelligence.

In 1932, Freire and his family moved to the neighbouring town of Jaboatão in the hopes of finding more affordable living conditions. Just two years later, his father unexpectedly passed away, worsening his family's financial situation and interrupting his schooling. Freire's siblings eventually found work to help put food on the table, and his mother fought to find him a scholarship so he could attend high school. His mother's efforts paid off, and in 1937, he was accepted at Osvaldo Cruz High School back in Recife. Freire began eating better thanks to his siblings' contributions, and he found himself suddenly understanding the readings he had previously struggled with. Although he was "poor, skinny, awkward, and ugly" (Freire, 1996, p. 62), he found his strength in his mastery of Portuguese grammar and began teaching Portuguese at Osvaldo Cruz while still a student there.

His passion for books on grammar and language eventually led him to study education. As there were no university-level programs in education at the time in Brazil, he enrolled at the Recife School of Law. Freire's career as a lawyer didn't last long, however. He couldn't bring himself to finish his very first case, which involved collecting the unpaid debts of a struggling dentist and quit law immediately after. He continued teaching at Osvaldo Cruz until he was offered a position at the Regional Department of Pernambuco's Social Service of Industry (SESI) as the Director of the Division of Education and Culture. If the violence of hunger is the foundation of Freire's work, his time at SESI is the very land his work was built on.

SESI and MCP

At SESI, Freire worked intimately on issues concerning punishment in the family and the school, leading him to study the relationship between authority and freedom more broadly. His research incited him to begin efforts to "democratize" the public school. He ran a discussion tour with students' families, where he argued that parents should strive for loving communication with their children in lieu of punishment. However, he quickly understood that he struggled to communicate in the *language* of his audience. As parents spoke up and shared the differences in their material realities, Freire regained *class knowledge* that brought him back to his childhood. He learnt concretely about "the need, when speaking to the people, for the educator to be up to an understanding of the world the people have" (Freire, 2014, p. 19). This would become a core element of Freire's later experience as he became the superintendent of SESI. He set up meetings among SESI clubs for workers of different social classes to voice their concerns and be heard; spaces where the people's word, and *world,* could be understood.

In 1960, the newly elected mayor of Recife founded, alongside Freire and many other politically engaged workers, artists, and intellectuals, the Movement for Popular Culture (MCP). Inspired by the work of French sociologists who, at the time, were emphasizing movements of *peuple et culture*, the MCP aimed to "empower the popular classes" (Freire, 1996, p. 115) through adult education. Freire worked with young volunteer educators to realize his pedagogical vision of *culture circles* where "new hypotheses for reading the world were created" (Freire, 1996, p. 121).

The culture circles had no pre-established program. The educators would first visit different popular locations across Recife, such as soccer clubs and churches, to discuss the possibility of an educational activity. Once a few willing "circles", were identified, the educators

would assess each member's educational interests. The educators would then gather as a team and reveal the overarching themes from their findings together. The results of their "thematic assessment" would provide the basis of each circle's unique educational program, which would continue to be refined through dialogue between the educators and circle members.

The MCP's adult education program solicited so much interest in themes related to literacy, democracy, and education, that it encouraged Freire and his colleagues to consider extending the idea of the culture circle to practices on adult literacy more specifically. He co-founded the Cultural Extension Service (SEC) at what is now the Federal University of Pernambuco and began formalizing the foundational educational principals upon which he would base his future adult literacy practices. These principles would eventually become known as the "Paulo Freire System" (Torres, 2021).

The Paulo Freire System

Freire's "system" consisted of an educational exchange that was fundamentally democratic in its nature. It challenged, or as Torres (2021) argues, sought to completely replace, what Freire called the "banking" concept of education. In the banking concept, students are taught to simply memorize and repeat without developing any capacity for critical thought. They are seen as empty, silent vessels waiting to be "filled" with information that serves the interests of the dominant or ruling classes. Freire experienced, time and time again throughout his life, how this educational concept reinforced a "culture of silence" that kept the oppressed classes not only illiterate, but unconscious of their very oppression. The goal of Freire's literacy trainings was thus to empower people to achieve what he considered as humanity's "ontological vocation" of liberation.

The epidemic of illiteracy in Brazil represented but a part of a larger *limit-situation*: a

historical reality that creates obstacles to liberation. Oppressors, or people who benefit from a limit-situation at the expense of the oppressed, will obfuscate its true reality to maintain their power. This means the oppressed are only able to perceive reality in fragments. This puts them in a double bind: someone who is illiterate is not only unable to read the dominant classes' *words*, but they also cannot read their *world.* Traditional literacy skills are not enough to reveal the full picture. This requires what Freire calls *conscientization*, or "consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world" (Freire, 2000, p. 79).

Freire's Methods

Freire went on to direct numerous literacy programs throughout the early 1960s grounded in his system. They each followed a specific method that expanded upon the work he and his teams had done with the first iterations of the culture circles in Recife. Freire found that for people to perceive life's limit-situations in their totality, they required access to a familiar context that is unfragmented, or fully whole. The goal of the culture circle, then, was to create and present a representation of reality, or codification, which the members could deconstruct, or decodify, to "exteriorize their view of the world" and "deepen their critical awareness of reality" (Freire, 2000, p. 106).

Moacir Gadotti (1994), describes the beginning of a typical culture circle:

> "… the alphabetizer began his work in the field with a notebook, and, if possible, a tape recorder, paying attention to all he saw and read. He mixed with people from the local community as closely as possible. There were no questionnaires or scripts to follow: he asked questions about people's lives and their way of looking at the world." (p. 18)

The objective was to generate what Freire called a list of *generative themes* from the "words, phrases, expressions, characteristic ways of speaking, of composing verses" (Gadotti,

1994, p. 19) that people use in their everyday life. Generative themes reveal people's *meaningful thematics*, or the meanings they ascribe to the world. Freire found that people's generative themes were comprised of specific *generative words,* and that these words could serve as conversation starters to get people talking, and reflecting, on their consciousness of reality.

The generative word was thus the first codification. The difference between Freire's culture circles for general adult education and for literacy more specifically was that the generative words had to not only be understood by the circle as relating to the generative theme but also had to present all the phonemes of Portuguese. Freire found that once learners had discussed the concrete meaning of a *word* in their *world*, they could easily understand and create new words using the same phonemes. For example, after dialogue on the reality of living in a slum, or *favela* in Portuguese, people could make sense of words using the phonemic units "fa" "ve" and "la". These decoding sessions were often accompanied by additional "coded situations", such as sketches or photographs of a slum.

The decoding process is key in helping people exteriorise their generative themes. As their themes surface and become clearer, so does the current limit-situation, which in turn reveals more themes to apprehend. As this cycle of critical awareness deepens, people become increasingly motivated towards *praxis,* or: "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (Freire, 2000, p. 126). Good codifications are necessary for this to happen, however. First, they must be sufficiently familiar to learners, so "they can easily recognize the situations and thus their own relation to them" (Freire, 2000, p. 114). Second, they must not be too simple or complicated: if they are overly explicit or enigmatic, they risk shutting down any meaningful dialogue.

The Angicos Literacy Program, Exile, and Legacy

Freire had the opportunity to put his system and methods to the ultimate test in 1963. There, in a joint effort between the SEC and the state government in Rio Grande do Norte, Freire began his largest educational program yet. The resulting Angicos Literacy Program was an overwhelming success. Freire and his colleagues taught 300 illiterate countrymen and women how to read and write Portuguese in only 45 days. Freire's emphasis on praxis was not lost on the program participants, either. One month after the end of the program, workers in Angicos went on strike for the very first time in the city's recorded history (Kirkendall, 2004; Torres, 2021).

The Angicos Literacy Program was so successful that the then-president of Brazil, João Goulart, invited Freire to rethink adult literacy education on a national scale. However, Freire's efforts came at the wrong place, during the wrong time. Brazil's military coup of April 1964 put a swift end to both Goulart's presidency and its planned literacy programming. Freire was arrested at his home, spent seventy days in prison, and was exiled from Brazil for having been "a 'revolutionary and an ignorant'" (Gerhardt, 1993, p. 439).

Freire spent 16 years in exile. During this time, he remained committed to writing and dialoguing about his "Pedagogy of the Oppressed". He continued his culture circles in Chile until concerns of military repression encouraged him to take up a visiting professorship at Harvard in 1969. A year later, he moved to Geneva, Switzerland, and acted as an educational advisor to the World Council of Churches. This work brought him to collaborate on popular education and adult literacy programs in former Portuguese colonies in Africa until his return to Brazil in 1980.

Freire passed away in 1997 after nearly two decades of political and educational organizing back in his home country of Brazil. He left behind a rich legacy that continues to

influence educational research and practice within Brazil around the world today (Steinberg, 2014), including the Landless Workers' Movement (MST) in Brazil (Mariano & Tarlau, 2024; Tarlau, 2019), the Adult Learning Project in Scotland (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011; Reeves, 2020), the Zapatista Movement in Mexico (Silva Montes, 2018), and the South African Students' Organisation (Hadfield, 2016) to name but a few.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Freire's work has been, and continues to be, of tremendous scholarly interest. There is a substantial body of literature on educational experiences designed explicitly with Freirean intentions or otherwise grounded in critical frameworks historically aligned with Freire's methodology of conscientization. This literature review is organized in three main sections. First, I will discuss some of the broader traditional applications of Freirean education, emphasising the interplay between facilitator and codification. Second, I will look at some of the benefits and challenges of working with popular media in Freirean education, as well as in adjacent fields, such as critical media literacy. Third, I will go over the Freirean research on video games, highlighting the gaps that my research project intends to fill.

Considering Freire's extensive international influence (Da Trindade et al., 2024), I have chosen to focus my literature review largely on research situated in the Global North. This is not to downplay in any way the academic work taking place in the Global South. On the contrary, the international scope of Freirean research is simply too large for me to consider for this single project. In Brazil alone, critical scholars continue to deepen the research on popular education movements (Fernandes & Da Trindade, 2024; Mariano & Tarlau, 2024; Vasconcelos et al., 2024) and are opening new doors to the use of digital technologies and design methodologies from a Freirean perspective (Oliveira Serpa & Mazzarotto, 2024; Vasconcelos & Vasconcelos, 2022; Zuin & De Mello, 2024). Many of my own colleagues have also recently written at length about Freirean educational experiences in Brazil (Nozaki Yano, 2024; Rodrigues Chagas, 2024; Sanches, 2022). To keep a focussed research scope, I have limited my research to the literature closest to my positioning as a Western researcher.

General Freirean Education

The literature presents a range of accounts documenting the ability of Freirean education to help deepen conscientization in diverse educational fields, such as teacher education, professional development, youth work, and adult learning.

Research in teacher education suggests that the use of Freirean culture circles can create meaningful communities of support for both pre-service and in-service teachers (Beltramo et al., 2020; Diaz, 2020; Freeman et al., 2020; Furman & Karno, 2023; Stillman et al., 2019). In these culture circles, members break out of epistemic isolation to work through problems as a community and create action built on collective knowledges. Problem-posing facilitation methods can also be impactful. For example, in a teacher training program designed to help students develop more diverse applications of physical education, Philpot (2016) found that students recognized one Freirean instructor's emphasis on vigorous dialogue "in a bid to uncover the taken-for-granted in their lives" (p. 155) as central to the transformation of beliefs they experienced during the program.

In addition to teacher education, Freirean education has the potential to support school counsellors (Alschuler, 1986); social workers (Burstow, 1991); peace educators (Klein, 2007); arts educators (Landkammer, 2019; Ward & Blanchfield, 2018) and community facilitators (Lathouras et al., 2021; Steer, 2022) in their work.

The transformative potential of Freirean pedagogy is not limited to professional development; however. Freire's legacy in popular education continues to live on in youth groups, (Ali, 2021; Grace & Wells, 2011; Humphries, 2019; Sheridan, 2018; Wallerstein & Sanchez-Merki, 1994), family literacy programs (Reyes & Torres, 2007; Rocha-Schmid, 2010), and a range of other projects, from church groups encouraging more ethically just forms of healthcare

activism (Clare, 2006), to critical training courses on everyday "life skills" (Suoranta et al., 2022).

Gerri and Collin Kirkwood (2011) provide a particularly noteworthy case of popular adult education in their aptly named book: "Living Adult Education: Freire in Scotland". The two adult educators rigorously document how they codified and decoded every developmental phase of the non-formal Adult Learning Project (ALP) in Edinburgh with other adult learners. The ALP created programs on history, democracy, intercultural exchange, women's rights, land ownership and even football. Each of these programs, respectively and in their own unique way, incentivized participants to create activist groups, publications, musical troupes and other forms of direct, resistive action that continue to organize against oppressive conditions in Scottish life (Reeves, 2020).

Other authors have documented their experiences creating codifications for specific cultural groups (Barndt, 1998; Burstow, 1989; Klein, 2007; Landkammer, 2019; Peckham, 2003). For Burstow (1991), codifications help give learners enough distance to "link the concrete with the abstract" (p. 206). In their analysis of five different Freirean projects, Laman et al. (2012) also found that the use of "textual, visual, and quotidian tools" were "key to supporting critical dialogue" (p. 211).

That said, codifications do not move people into conscientization alone. Laman et al. (2012) also point out the role the group facilitator plays in motivating participants towards praxis. Facilitators who consistently ask questions (Philpot, 2016; Sanches, 2022; R. Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015), use language that recognizes participant agency (Laman et al., 2012) and encourage participants to build off of one another's contributions (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011) are instrumental to supporting participants in their conscientization. Acting as a facilitator

in this capacity doesn't come easily; however, and entails its own laborious, yet equally transformative, journey towards praxis (Gordon, 2017; McCarthy & O'Brien, 2020).

While facilitation is important, some codifications are easier to work with than others. Though Freire often worked with drawings, Kirkwood and Kirkwood (2011) found this medium challenging. Their participants tended to get overly distracted by the artistic elements; they had greater success using photographs, instead. For Burstow (1989), the use of drawings itself wasn't an issue so much as the content depicted within them. In her research with former inmates, Burstow's team drew a number of scenes associated with traditional schooling, some of which were particularly grim. At times, these drawings effectively helped participants "reach out to each other and identify with each other's struggle" (p. 33). However, some were *too* relatable, triggering difficult emotional responses in the group that would halt critical discussion. It thus key that both the format and content of a codification be appropriately tailored to each group's cultural context (Barndt, 1998).

Popular Culture and Media Education

There are interesting examples of Freirean education that contextualize their codifications through popular culture. One notable area of study has involved bringing specific popular sub-cultures into Freirean education.

Critical educators have worked extensively with various music cultures such as hip-hop (Akom, 2009; Hanley, 2007; MacDonald, 2016; Morrell & Duncan-Andrade, 2006; Scheyen, 2017), jazz (Shevock, 2015), and rock'n'roll (Shumway, 1989) to build conscientization. Akom (2009), for example, developed a Freirean "Critical Hip Hop Pedagogy" for a teacher education course. With the students and other teachers of the course, they created a critical hip hop studio in collaboration with a local radio station. The project created a dialogical space for teachers-in-

training to “use hip hop culture to hold a mirror to society; to name problems, to identify relations among problems, and to re-imagine them into new strategies utilizing transformational resistance” (p. 62).

Scholars have also linked the use of specific visual or textual Freirean codifications with the decoding process typical to media literacy studies (Carr, 2009; Holmes, 2000; Yosso, 2002).The use of popular film (Almeida & Lockard, 2005; Charlebois, 2008; Duncan-Andrade, 2004; Taber et al., 2017; Yosso, 2002), including animated films for children (Egan-Simon, 2020; Souto-Manning & Price-Dennis, 2012), music videos (Kelly & Currie, 2021; Watts & Abdul-Adil, 1998), as well as TV shows (Jubas, 2023; Liang, 2021), comes up the most in the Freirean literature; however, some of the most interesting cases have involved popular novels (A. Brown, 2011) as well as news articles (Solorzano, 1989).

Amy Brown (2011) ran a culture circle with a small group of 10th grade students where they read and discussed various urban fiction books typically excluded from the mainstream curriculum. Duncan-Andrade and Morrel (2005) have argued that the exclusion of popular texts essentially further alienates those students who identify with their authors. Indeed, one of Brown’s (2011) participants highlighted how it was “fun” and “good to actually read a book that related to people and things I know and see” (p. 8). Still, problem-posing popular media is not without its challenges. Though the culture circle helped push the students to “identify and critique oppression … to be comfortable as Black and Brown female intellectuals … they remained uncritical of meritocratic and mainstream models of success to overcome structural forms of oppression” (p. 9).

Solorzano (1989), however, shared a radically different experience bringing a Freirean approach into a community college course where students problematized “the problem of the

negative portrayal of Chicanos in the media" (p. 218). Although some students resisted the political nature of the course, most were keen on getting involved in direct action. Students read and discussed historical news articles on Chicanos in the media, interviewed community members, and compared their findings with the ways Chicanos were being depicted in recent popular films, specifically in respect to youth gangs. In light of their findings, students organized informational pickets, boycotts, letter-writing campaigns and even collaborated with a local community association to establish a formal committee that successfully decreased the popularity of films on Chicano youth gangs.

It is also worth stepping outside of the Freirean literature to consult some of the educational work being done with popular culture from other critical frameworks. The field of critical media literacy in particular provides many noteworthy examples. Though it tends to focus less on revolutionary praxis, many critical media literacy programs are still heavily Freirean in practice, even if it they don't outwardly identify as such (Eken, 2002; Faidley, 2021; Stuckey & Kring, 2007; Venegas et al., 2021). This is likely due in part to the field of critical media literacy having already been "pre-established" as Freirean in nature by previous scholars (Kellner & Share, 2007; Tisdell, 2008).

Lewis (2020), for example, met urban minority students in the primary school classroom to listen to and discuss songs that were impactful to them. In their discussions, the children related themes in the songs they had chosen to their own experiences of "white privilege, racism, and self-esteem" (p. 54), revealing a "dialogic relationship between listener and music" (p. 58). She highlights the importance of listening *together* to "[create] spaces of empowerment and agency" (p. 58). Educators who work primarily with film or TV shows have echoed this finding; however, it can be challenging to balance the time it takes to watch together with leaving enough

time for discussion (T. Brown, 2011; Charlebois, 2008; Jubas, 2023).

In Tisdell and Thompson's (2007) critical media literacy work with adult learners, participants highlighted how it is not only the popular texts themselves, but the *discussion* of them that helped them see things "from a different angle" (p. 668). Jubas' (2023) students also echoed this finding in her research on the use of popular TV shows and films in professional education. Furthermore, both authors stress the role that *pleasure* plays in teaching with popular culture, remarking how it can be both a "facilitator and deterrent of critical media literacy" (Tisdell, 2008, p. 55). One of Jubas et al.'s (2023) participants notably described watching popular TV shows "like brain candy" (p. 11), highlighting the double-edge of working with highly familiar texts.

This effect is once again mediated by both the *content* and the *format* of the popular text. Lane et al. (2015) found that their group of pre-adolescent girls struggled to reach the same depth of analysis they achieved while discussing the popular novel *The Hunger Games* after watching its film adaptation. They were "more attracted to the film versions" of the series' main characters and found themselves "drawn to [its] gendered simplicity" (p. 125). For Kelly and Currie (2021), the presence of "obvious stereotypes can mask the need to engage more deeply with the media text" (p. 683). Their students were quick to point out and condone blatant portrayals of hypersexuality in music videos, for example, without digging into more critical forms of analysis.

Although Kelly and Currie (2021) recommended the use of "counter-frames", such as feminist texts, as a useful pedagogical tool when working with heavily stereotyped media, practical applications of educational strategies can always have unpredictable results. Taber et al. (2017) found that their adult participants, who were initially critical of gender representations in

traditional fairy tales, still desired hegemonic ideals after watching a feminist retelling of Snow White. Though they appreciated seeing the main character reimagined as a stronger and more independent woman, they took issue with the men being too "feminine" and regretted that the film didn't have a more typically heteronormative ending.

Jubas et al. (2023) highlight that while powerful media representations can foster engagement, they can also "[redirect student focus] to their own experiences and anxieties which, if not addressed, might lead to their disengagement from the course or even deep emotional upset" (p. 11-12). Egan-Simon (2020) echoes this point, adding the risk of emotional damage to classroom or group dynamics. Though neither of these authors faced situations that quite mirrored Burstow's (1989) challenges with her learner group, they echo her finding that codifications must be relatable without being too emotionally triggering. Indeed, as Jubas (2023) also asserts, cultural texts that don't resonate with learners can be unproductive as well, leaving students to deal with "their sense of confusion" rather than the critical activity at hand (p. 12).

One form of cultural texts that can be especially relatable to various learner groups is *games*. Crocco (2011) highlights how games can "reify hegemonic assumptions about the world" not only through their *content* but "the deep structure of their rules and mechanics" (p. 25). He used the popular board game *Monopoly* as a Freirean codification in a college-level basic writing course to raise consciousness on "social mobility under capitalism" (p. 31). He modified the starting characters, so they all played with "different amounts of starting money, land, and privilege to simulate class inequality" (p. 32) and provided time for discussion before and after gameplay. He found that students problematized the relationship between luck and privilege with "81% of students [being] willing to change the rules of the game in order to make opportunity more equal" (p. 35). Whether his students brought that energy with them outside of the

classroom to effect change in the world is another story. Still, his findings beg for further research on the role that other types of games, like video games, can play in Freirean education.

Critical Video Game Pedagogies

As an avid gamer myself, reading Crocco's (2011) Freirean adaptation of *Monopoly* sparked a hope that I might find similar research, especially using video games. What I found was interesting, yet quite different from what I expected. There is indeed a wide body of literature on Freirean gaming; however, it focusses largely on new game design and development (Buckingham & Burn, 2007; Coopilton, 2023; Flanagan, 2009; Flanagan et al., 2007; Frasca, 2001; Jackson, 2022; Keating, 2021; Mendels, 2020; Prax, 2020; Santos et al., 2019; Tafari, 2024) rather than the decoding of existing games.

There are good reasons for this. Large-scale video game productions, often referred to as AAA games, are driven by specific economic and political objectives (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023). Unsurprisingly, a large body of research reveals that these AAA games transmit a range of hegemonic ideals, including: colonialism, domination, imperialism, whiteness, racism, capitalism, neo-liberalism, authoritarianism, and militarism (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023; Dietrich, 2013; Fuchs et al., 2018; Hutchinson, 2021; Jennings, 2022; Jiwandono, 2023; Shliakhovchuk & Muñoz García, 2020). While independent game developers have more freedom to develop more critical games, they are not immune from reproducing these oppressive values in their work (Morrison, 2024).

Building off of Mary Flanagan's (2006) legacy of "making games for social change", liberatory game design practices are increasingly being brought directly into practice in a variety of settings such as classrooms (Jackson, 2022), school-wide workshops (Tafari, 2024), and

"game jams[1]" (Cerezo-Pizarro et al., 2023; Coopilton, 2023). This is important work; however, I still see a critical gap to be filled. It will take time for these new, more socially-just games to enter the public consciousness, if they ever do at all. Furthermore, there is no guarantee they will be understood appropriately. As Cerezo-Pizarro et al., (2023) highlights: "the process of the transmission–assimilation of culture is not only nourished by the intentions of the development agents involved. It is also built on the basis of the interactions that consumers have with the environment." (p. 18). There is still work that can be done with existing games and the people who play them.

I am not alone in my concerns. In 2013, de Albuquerque & Ainsworth presented a Freirean proposal for "teachers to change the relationship that students have with commercial games" (p. 604). In his Ph.D. dissertation, de Albuquerque (2016) problematized the existing "games literacy" discourse, which stems from the works of prominent game and literacy educators such as James Paul Gee (2007), Kurt Squire (2011), David Buckingham and Andrew Burn (2007). De Albuquerque (2016) concluded that, although these game educators often propose "critical" literacies, their understandings may in fact be "less politicised than critical theorists would conceive." (p. 64). Though many critical media literacy theorists understand their work as stemming from Freirean pedagogy, media literacy and conscientization are not necessarily the same thing. It is possible to promote critical thinking without encouraging liberatory struggle.

This tension is reflected in the current literature on popular video game education. Nash and Brady (2022) as well as Bacalja (2022) both conducted literature reviews on the use of video

[1] Game jams are usually non-formal workshop groupings where game designers of different skill levels meet to design and create a game together in a set time period.

games in the English Language Arts (ELA) high school classroom. Nash and Brady (2022) found that "the ability to discuss video games within a classroom space led to critical reflection on why and how [students] played games" (p. 971). However, they did not elaborate on the political implications of this type of reflection, nor did they discuss whether any specific pedagogical methods played a role in its development. Bacalja (2022) reported that the use of *questions* specifically could help draw student "attention to the relationship between character representation and social hierarchies" (p. 15). However, this finding was primarily supported by his own research (Bacalja, 2018) and does not seem otherwise prominent in the literature. Indeed, Cole et al.'s, (2024) scoping review on the general use of video games in secondary classrooms doesn't mention any critical outcomes at all.

That said, Bacalja's (2018) research is still interesting. He designed a four-week teaching unit to study the use of popular video games with critical literacy pedagogies in the classroom. In one Freirean activity, students played the popular, albeit highly controversial game *Bully* (Rockstar, 2006) and read an article reporting on the game's banning in certain countries. They held discussions on the themes present in both the game and article, then provided written responses to a question "designed to determine whether students could articulate how the [game's] text reflected attitudes and positions from outside of the game" (p. 161). Students provided a variety of critical readings of the game; however, most of their responses did not reflect "the desired level of abstraction" (p. 162) that Bacalja expected from the activity.

Ultimately, Bacalja (2018) concluded that he did not sufficiently question his students on the relationship between the game's world and the world that exists outside of games. His adoption of Freirean pedagogy was also limited in terms of students' praxis. That said, teachers working in public high schools often have few freedoms when working with critical pedagogies.

Although Bacalja's study in particular took place in Australia, one need only consider the impact of Arizona House Bill 2281, which put an outright ban on any teaching of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in public K-12 Arizona schools, to imagine the restrictions that public school teachers can face when teaching Freirean principles (Neely, 2014; Wanberg, 2013).

While there has been some academic interest in politicizing popular video game education with adult learners (Coopilton, 2023; Egan, 2019; Love, 2017; McLaughlin, 2012), the existing research is mostly theoretical. Love (2017), for example, built a pedagogical approach that integrates analytical theories from the field of games studies with Freirean problem-posing methods for use with undergraduate students in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses. Egan (2019) also presented a theoretical framework for a "critical game-based pedagogy" for undergraduate ELA courses. However, I couldn't find any further research on how these models work in practice.

Indeed, Coopilton (2023), shares my finding that: "there has barely been any empirical research on how games could be used to challenge oppression in higher education, at work, or in informal learning environments among young adults." Any Freirean examples that I could find were ultimately focussed on new game design. These included Flanagan et al.'s (2007) workshop series where game designers learnt ways to uncover the values in existing popular games using problem-posing methods, as well as Coopilton's (2023) own doctoral research working with game jams. There is a clear need for Freirean research on video game education with adult learners outside of game design environments.

In light of this, I seek to answer the following question: how do adult learners decode video games in a non-formal, Freirean learning environment?

Chapter 3: Research Design

Building off the presented literature, I have chosen to locate my research within a Freirean philosophical framework. I begin this chapter with a discussion of some of the complexities and nuances involved in conducting Freirean research. I then detail my research methodology, which presents the Digital Decodings project, how it was designed, the space it was held in, as well as its participants. The chapter concludes with my data collection and analysis strategies.

Research Framework

Freire has persistently reiterated over his lifetime that there is no "blueprint" for following his work, once famously exclaiming that: "in order to follow me it is essential not to follow me!" (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 30). However, attempts to reinterpret a Freirean pedagogy without the revolutionary values at the heart of conscientization have led to what Donaldo Macedo (2000) has called a "mechanization" (p. 17) of Freire's work, which de-emphasizes education's political role in the struggle for liberation. One of Freire's long-time collaborators and friends, Macedo has been particularly critical of Western educators for extracting certain methods out of Freire's work and depoliticizing them for use in the institutionalized classroom. Macedo, along with others, have taken to calling this "pseudo-Freireanism" (e.g. Kidd & Kumar, 1981). This has not come without pushback, however. Peckham (2003), for example, explicitly fights against these "accusations", writing: "I have found my identity primarily as a teacher, and it is as a teacher that I have used what I know of Freire, without feeling obliged to reproduce either him or his agenda" (p. 230).

This shows an interesting contradiction for Western educators working with Freirean

pedagogy. How might one go about reinterpreting Freire's work for a North American educational context without simply mechanizing it?

I believe doing so involves focussing on Freire's underlying philosophy rather than the specific methods discussed in the work. Though Freire found success in using a specific dialogic, problem-posing approach, the methods themselves do not necessarily represent the heart of his pedagogy. Rather, his choice of methods must be understood within his own philosophical framework. Doing so reveals the emancipatory foundation at the core of the Freirean "system", which exists on a unique ontological, epistemological, and political level (Torres, 2021). The resulting methodology ultimately encourages a variety of methods beyond those practiced by Freire himself, so long as they are contextually driven towards the mutual liberation of both learner and educator. This follows the spirit of what Macedo (1997) has called an "Anti-Method Pedagogy".

For example, several recent authors (Allen & Rossatto, 2009; Choules, 2011; Stauber, 2017) have illustrated issues that can arise when using a dialogical method in a contemporary North American context. Choules (2011) highlights how emphasizing dialogue itself as the end-all-be-all method of reaching conscientization favours those who have historically been told they make for good speakers, notably white men. Both Choules (2011) as well as Allen and Rosatto (2009) share examples of how allowing the "dominant voice" to run unchecked in a culture circle can effectively silence or shut down other's experiences, reinforcing the status quo. Stauber (2017) complicates this relationship between silence and power further, arguing that "orthodox" Freirean pedagogues are at risk of misinterpreting silence as "poorly developed critical consciousness" (p. 565) when in reality, it can be a unique non-verbal act of resistance against the quite literally *louder* dominant voice.

That said, I don't aim to throw the baby out with the bathwater. There are aspects of Freire's initial method that are still useful in the context of my research. For example, I agree with Freire's assertion that, for people to perceive life's limit-situations and generative themes in their totality, they require access to a more relatable coded situation, or codification. As an educator myself, I have seen how receptive learners can be when they engage with the familiar. Furthermore, some of most transformative learning experiences of my career have indeed resulted from dialogical methods, either one-or-one, or in small groups. In addition, some of my most profound moments of conscientization have happened just from talking about video games with friends.

Popular video games provide a familiar context to many, and within them lie, albeit obfuscated, the generative themes of the people who make them. I agree with Freire who considered the meaningful thematic of our time to be one of domination (Freire, 2000) and believe the limit-situation faced most today in Canada is the colonization of Turtle Island. Could a Freirean video game discussion group help participants reveal these generative themes? Which video games, or specific elements within different games, might serve participants best? How might my disposition as a facilitator affect the process?

To answer these questions, I designed and facilitated a "gaming circle" that involved decoding popular video games in a dialogic group setting inspired by Freire's culture circle. I called this project "Digital Decodings".

Methodology

Digital Decodings was a qualitative action research (AR) project. A qualitative approach suited this project best because I was seeking to understand questions of experience, meaning and perspective (Hammarberg et al., 2016). More specifically, I located this research within a

constructivist paradigm since aimed to reconstruct various subjective realities taking place in a unique, local context (Hatch, 2002).

While defining action research (AR) can be a fickle thing, Kemmis et al.'s (2014) suggestion that AR "aims to change practices, people's understandings of their practices, and the conditions under which they practice" (p. 59) aligned with my educational goals for the project. I was curious to see whether I could stimulate participants towards a liberatory praxis, which indeed presupposed a desire to change people's practices. Although I felt strongly that *participatory* action research (PAR) would have been a more authentically Freirean way of doing research, there were logistic and academic issues inherent to an MA thesis that kept me from providing control to participants in all stages of the research process, which is fundamental to PAR (Herr & Anderson, 2005). Since I was ultimately the only person accountable for the intervention design, group facilitation, data collection and analysis, I feel that it is more accurate to describe Digital Decodings as an AR project rather than a PAR one.

Digital Decodings

The goal of Digital Decodings was to stimulate participants towards dialogue that would reveal the generative themes of the games being played, of the world they were created in, and of the world the participants and I live in. Concretely, this looked like the participants and I sitting in a circle around a television, taking turns playing different video games, and then talking about what we had just played. Except it wasn't just *talking*: I had to keep in my mind my role as a Freirean facilitator and ask problem-posing *questions.* However, these questions can be quite strange, uncomfortable and even at times frustrating (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011; Philpot, 2016).

I knew it would be difficult to receive authentic, vulnerable responses if participants felt

like other aspects of the project were strange and uncomfortable, too. Effective problem-posing also requires attending to participants' felt sense of safety (Gordon, 2017; Wallerstein & Sanchez-Merki, 1994). So, I modelled the project after something I felt participants would be familiar with: playing a table-top role-playing game (TTRPG).

TTRPGs such as Dungeons and Dragons are the analogue ancestors of modern role-playing video games and are still widely enjoyed by millions of players worldwide (Given & Polkinghorne, 2024). These games are commonly played in *sessions*, usually a few hours long, and are held on a regular, often weekly basis. This structure, I hoped, would make the gaming circle feel more like a meeting of friends than a stuffy research project.

A common mainstay of the TTRPG format is the *Session Zero*. During the Session Zero, participants meet for introductions, discuss ground rules, get a sense of the campaign they are expecting to join, and figure out scheduling. Replace "campaign" with "research project", and that's exactly how we kicked off Digital Decodings.

The Space and Schedule

Our sessions took place in the research-creation space of the Centre for the Study of Learning and Performance (CSLP). I informed the administrators of my interest in the space shortly after receiving ethics approval in December 2023, and, after a few exchanges, had the research-creation space booked from February until April 2024.

The CSLP's research-creation space is on the upper level of a protected heritage building in downtown Montréal. It is a large, open space that had a large television, a round, wooden table with seating for four, and a few desks. Cobblestone walls and tall a-frame beams provided a grounding presence in the lofty space. We had a good amount of privacy, though we were

sometimes interrupted by security doing their rounds.

We met every Monday evening, from 6:00-9:00PM, for seven weeks, including the Session Zero and focus group. Before each session, I would pick up a pizza and some soft drinks to bring to the space. I also brought my own personal PlayStation, controllers, charging cables, laptop, and notebook from my home to the space each session. I often arrived at the same time as one or two participants, and they almost always helped me set up unprompted.

Figure 1. The space in which we held our sessions.

The sessions were scheduled to run for three hours, but were in practice generally shorter, as we generally preferred to wait for those who were running late rather than start without them, and sessions rarely ran late. Unless somebody had to leave right after the session, we would all clean the space together before leaving. We almost always exited the space as a group and would carry a conversation until we had to our separate ways. Often, I rode the metro home with another participant or two, and we'd continue chatting along the way.

Codification Selection

As highlighted in the literature, the codifications themselves are an important part of any decoding exercise. They should be familiar to participants, including the facilitator, and must

strike a balance between complexity and simplicity:

> A codification should not be too enigmatic, so that those responding to it in a group will be able to find themselves in it and interpret it in the light of their own experience; nor too explicit, otherwise the group is deprived of the task of interpretation. (Kirkwood & Kirkwood, 2011, p. 10)

At first, I considered presenting prospective participants with a list of games that I've already played where they could indicate their level of familiarity with each game. After discussion with my supervisor, however, we agreed that this list of games would probably be too large to draw any meaningful results from. We concluded that choosing a specific game *genre* instead could be a good compromise. There are generally enough consistencies within the thematic universe of a specific genre for participants to feel familiar enough with games they haven't played, so long as they know the genre. Though I enjoy a range of video game genres, I often find myself playing single player role-playing games (RPGs) the most, so this is the genre that I chose.

Single-player RPGs might not get quite the level of media attention that multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) games do, but they are still a widely enjoyed game format. Eshuis et al. (2023) found that 51% of their 145 participants preferred single player RPGs over other single player game genres or MMORPGs. Furthermore, they found correlations between functional and psychosocial elements unique to RPGs and their perceived enjoyment.

The generative themes in a single-player RPG are present not only in the genre's core ludic qualities (questing, leveling, skill acquisition, etc.), but in each individual game's narrative elements, (plot, character development, etc.), gameplay mechanics (degree of character control, combat features, etc.), and graphical or textual depictions of the in-game world (character models, objects, landscapes, texts, etc.). Because these features can vary greatly across games, I

chose several different games that I felt presented a diverse range of ludic, narrative, and mechanical elements to decode.

Although role-playing games produced in Japan (JRPGs) are especially popular (and my personal preference), I chose to mostly focus on RPGs produced in the West. JPRGs "[emerge] from different historical and social conditions [and] possess an aesthetic and gameplay different from their Western counterparts" (Schules, 2012). For example, themes related to atomic warfare are often prominent in Japanese popular media (Murakami, 2005), including Japanese video games (Scheiding, 2019) but can be easily missed by an audience unfamiliar with Japanese war memory (Hutchinson, 2021). I did, however, pick one Japanese game that intentionally drew inspiration from Western titles to "become more global" (Kelly, 2012).

In total, I chose seven different video games. I selected these specific games for a few reasons. First, they were games that I already owned and had access to. Second, they were games I felt I knew well enough to be comfortable facilitating problem-posing discussions around. Third, though they all stuck to the core features of the RPG genre, each game was still quite different from one another. I was curious to see how these differences would affect the decoding process.

For copyright reasons, we played less than two hours of each game. The games we ended up actually choosing to play, the order in which we played them, as well as how we decided which parts of each game we wanted to play, are detailed in Chapter 4.

Table 1. List of games selected for Digital Decodings

Mass Effect 2 (Legendary Edition) (2010/2021, BioWare, Canada) Sci-fi third-person shooter role playing game with character creator.	**The Outer Worlds** (2019, Obsidian, USA) Sci-fi first-person shooter role playing game with character creator.
Dragon Age: Inquisition (2014, BioWare, Canada) Third-person fantasy role-playing game with character creator.	**Horizon Zero Dawn** (2017, Guerilla Games, Netherlands) Post-apocalyptic third-person action-adventure role-playing game. No character creator.
The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt (2015, CD Projekt Red, Poland) Third-person fantasy action role-playing game. No character creator.	**Divinity: Original Sin 2** (2017, Larian, Belgium) Isometric turn-based fantasy role-playing game with character creator
Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen (2012/2017, Capcom, Japan) Third-person fantasy action role-playing game with character creator.	See Appendix 1 for a full summary of each game.

Participant Recruitment

My recruitment strategy involved using purposive, or judgmental, sampling within my own communities. Judgmental sampling is non-probabilistic and chooses participants "on the basis of the researcher's judgement about which ones will be the most useful or representative" (Babbie, 2016, p. 187).

To be able to decode a coded object, one must first be able to recognize it and relate to it. This meant that I needed to find participants who were already familiar with the video game

RPGs. Fortunately, this didn't prove too challenging for me since I am already part of a few gamer groups that regularly discuss RPGs.

Most of my communities are connected through an online platform called Discord. On Discord, people create virtual spaces called "servers" to chat, share photos, create events, and hang out together online. Some of the local servers I am a part of have channels dedicated specifically for people who play video games. After obtaining ethics approval for my research protocol, as well as consent from each servers' moderation team, I posted a call for participants in the appropriate channel for a few different servers. I also shared the post on my personal Instagram account. My post (see Appendix 2) included a description of my research purpose and a link for interested individuals to fill out a brief screening questionnaire.

I designed the screening questionnaire (see Appendix 3) to feature two "rounds" of questions. The first started with a series of initial yes/no questions, filtering respondents based on my most basic inclusion criteria. Only participants who reported playing video games, playing RPGs *specifically*, being 18 years of age or older, available to participate weekly for a six-to-eight-week period, and willing to provide their contact information were shown the second round of questions. The second round asked for contact information and was followed by three questions assessing the respondents about their interest in my research, their prior experience with discussion groups, and what they might imagine an RPG gaming circle to look like. This allowed me to select participants whose motivations to join my project were rooted in a genuine interest in the research goals, as well as a general love of role-playing video games, rather than just a desire to help a friend.

I initially recruited five people and four people were retained for the full duration of the study. This total number of people is significantly less than what is seen in many Freirean

programs; however, several scholars have found that working in small groups is more conducive to engaging in critical dialogue (Sanches, 2022; Shevock, 2015; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Indeed, having a smaller number of participants helped me get to know everyone better on a more human level and to perform a deeper analysis of their experiences.

Participants

The participants in Digital Decodings were Feivel, Kade, Terri, and Willow. Pseudonyms were created collaboratively with each participant. We ranged in age from 22 to 34 years old and the median age was 30 years old. When asked to self-identify race, two participants answered "White", one "Caucasian", one "Chinese" and one "Ashkenazi Jew". There was a broad range of gender diversity: no two participants reported the same gender identity and only one identified as cisgender. All participants identified as either queer or pansexual, with two participants also reporting identities on the asexual spectrum. All participants had either a pre-university or a bachelor's degree. I was the only participant enrolled in graduate studies. All participants lived in Montréal at the time of the study. Two participants, including myself, were not originally from Québec and had moved to Montréal in adulthood.

I already knew Willow, Feivel, and Terri from Discord, and they all knew each other as well. I was closest to Willow and Feivel, as we occasionally played board games together. Terri and I had also met at a few outings organized through Discord. Though nobody in the group knew Kade prior to the sessions, they became a fast friend and joined us on Discord after the study concluded.

Data Collection

I collected data from four sources:

First, I assembled all the personal notes, drafts, journal entries and other writings that I made while designing the project. I used this data to conduct an initial sub-study on my personal experiences designing and organizing the project (McPhail, 2024). The results of this sub-study generated their own source of data that I used to inform my findings in this thesis.

Second, I took observation notes while facilitating the sessions. I took handwritten short-form field notes during each session and typed them out on the computer, usually the day before the following session to help remind me what had happened in the last. Typing out my notes gave me the opportunity to expand on my observations with additional thoughts and insights, which proved useful during my analysis.

Third, I engaged in a reflexive journalling practice between each session. I did this journalling directly on the computer as soon as I came home from each session. I found this practice time-consuming, and often dreaded having to do it, but I stuck with it, and it ultimately proved to be quite rewarding.

Fourth, I held a focus group with participants where I asked some questions on their experience in the project (see Appendix 4). I recorded the focus group audio and transcribed it in MAXQDA. I had never transcribed focus group audio before and had not anticipated how much more challenging it would be than transcribing standard interview audio. My initial intention was to create a full verbatim transcript; however, it quickly became clear that the amount of overlapping group talk would make the transcript unreadable. At the expense of losing some of the group atmosphere, I decided to selectively transcribe only the people who were actively speaking, unless an interjection was particularly noteworthy. I tried to strike a balance between

removing mis-speaks, stutters, and other accidental utterances that cluttered the text while still respecting each participant's natural speaking style. When the transcript was done, I sent participants an example of sample quotes in context with my preliminary findings for their approval.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis offers a flexible method to "make sense of collective or shared meanings and experiences" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57) and has been adapted for use in applied educational research (Peel, 2020; Xu & Zammit, 2020). I followed Braun and Clarke's (2012) approach to thematic analysis, which is comprised of six key steps:

1) Familiarizing oneself with the data;

2) Generating initial codes;

3) Searching for themes;

4) Reviewing themes;

5) Defining and naming themes; and,

6) Producing the report.

I used MAXQDA to first analyze my data. I chose to work with the focus group transcript first since I felt participants, as well as myself, were closest to the research questions after the sessions were done and we'd had some time to reflect on them. I started with a fast and loose *in vivo* coding of the focus group to first get a sense of what I was working with. I then grouped these codes into a larger set of "structural codes" based off my research questions. This technique is recommended for making large data sets more manageable in thematic analysis (Namey et al., 2008). I then worked inductively within each structured section to bring out the

relevant themes. Although I had considered doing a deductive analysis with prefigured categories from the literature, I found it preferable to allow themes to emerge naturally from the groups' experiences within our own unique context, instead (Creswell, 2013).

The findings from the focus group analysis created my first codebook. I then used this codebook to do an initial deductive coding of my field notes. I also inductively coded any pertinent themes that came up in my field notes but weren't captured in the focus group and triangulated these findings with my codebook. Finally, I coded my research journal. Since this data set was the furthest removed from my research questions, I only coded it deductively from my codebook.

Once I had finished coding and reviewing the themes in MAXQDA, I sent them to participants for review. From their feedback, I proceeded to write up my findings, which constitutes an entire phase of analysis in its own right (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Once I had created an ordered draft of my findings, I sent a copy to participants for further validation. I drew from their feedback again to refine my analysis further before reaching out a final time for validation on my interpretation of the group's conscientization experiences.

Chapter 4: The Sessions

In this chapter, I share my experiences facilitating the sessions. I have chosen to do so in a first-person narrative style interspersed by moments of my own reflexivity. My goal with this is to provide readers with a felt sense of connection to the journey of being a Freirean facilitator working with video games. It also serves to contextualize the findings of my thematic analysis, which are presented in Chapter 5.

Session Zero

Once we had all signed our consent forms, we formally started our "first" session — our Session Zero. I already knew three of the five participants, and I knew they were familiar with each other as well, but I wanted to give participants the space to acknowledge those whom they were already familiar with on their own terms. We also took this opportunity to have a discussion on our ground rules for the sessions, including expectations for general behaviour or any topics that could be particularly difficult to bring up. I started by introducing myself. The three participants who knew each other (as well as me) were comfortable recognizing each other during their introductions and seemed pleased to all be in the group together. I wondered how this dynamic might affect the participants who *were not* already familiar with any other members of the group. One of these individuals ended up writing me after the Session Zero to withdraw from the study.

After we had gone through the introductions and established our "code of conduct" for the sessions, we discussed how we wanted to select and play through the games. We made relatively quick work of the task, pondering the benefits and challenges of different approaches. We felt quite firmly that the tutorial section of each game would be less interesting to play

through together, so we agreed that I would advance through the tutorial of each game on my own until I reached the first major save point. This aligned with my initial brainstorm of how we might approach the gameplay scheduling.

There were two things the group brought up which surprised me, however. The first was the desire to pass the controller between multiple players for each game. I thought the preference would be for participants to each "appropriate" a specific game for themself, but they were intent on sharing the gameplay experience of each game with one another, especially for games certain participants hadn't yet played before. The second was participants' interest in going through each game's character creator together. I thought this would be understood similarly to the game tutorials, as something less pertinent to the sessions, but it was clearly meaningful to participants. I was concerned that this would take up too much time in the sessions and prevent us from moving on to different game elements, so we decided to dedicate an entire session to character creation. This meant there would be one fewer game that we would end up playing, but we felt it might still be worth it.

Session One

We had initially agreed to dedicate Session One to character creation. However, Willow ended up being unable to attend. Since they were especially looking forward to the character creation session, we decided to change course and play *The Witcher 3* in their absence.

Feivel was the first to play. As he commanded Geralt around the sprawling wilderness, I was struck by just how much information was present on screen. Despite having played the game multiple times, approaching it from a mindset of a Freirean facilitator did not come easily to me. At first, I tried asking questions about any codifications I noticed as soon as I saw them in-game, but I soon realized that this wasn't helpful. It was difficult for us to hold a group conversation

while we were all "gaming" together, even if only one person was controlling the game. It ended up being much easier for me to just write down any codifications that caught my eye so I could bring them up to discuss once we were done gaming. These included specific gameplay elements as well as any comments or questions made by the group while playing.

After playing for some time, we reached a slower point in the game where it felt natural to pause and take a break to discuss. Curious to see how the group might respond to a very wide, open-ended question, I kicked off the discussion by asking:

"What do you guys think?"

The group began by commenting on the graphics, story and difficulty of the game. I wasn't sure how to engage with these responses in a problem-posing way, so I decided to wait for the conversation to unfold further. In time, our discussion shifted from a "review" of the game to a more literary interpretation of the game's narrative. We talked about the game's overarching themes of conflict, conquest, dispossession and occupation, and associated various in-game symbols with the different themes. On the surface, it seemed like we were getting closer to conscientization, but something was missing. There was conflict, conquest, dispossession and occupation *in the game*, certainly, but what about in our *history*, or even in our *own lives*? We had begun *analyzing* but were not yet *problematizing*. Still, the discussion continued.

Eventually, without yet any prompting on my behalf, the group began pondering the ethics of being a monster slayer. In *The Witcher 3*, the title of "Witcher" is used to designate a specific group of monster slayers: ones who are generally seen as cold, calculating, money-hungry, and problematically politically neutral in situations of injustice. The group eventually likened the profession of "Witcher" to that of *firefighter*, with Kade illustrating how firefighting used to be a private, for-profit industry in the 19th century United States. Was killing monsters a

public service? What are the moral implications of killing monsters for a living? Although we still weren't relating the coded object back to our own lives, we had begun *historicizing* it and were starting to draw generative themes. At this point, I felt it was a good time to turn the discussion towards some of the codifications I had taken down in my notes.

Figure 2. Geralt and the common soldiers

At one point in the game, Geralt is halted by two guards as he attempts to enter a barricaded encampment. The guards initially deny Geralt access, assuming he is a belligerent local, but eventually let him pass through once he identifies himself as a Witcher. When this scene played out during the session, it prompted Terri to ponder aloud how it could be that these "commoners" weren't able to recognize a Witcher. Kade pointed out that they were "soldiers", not commoners. In response, Terri clarified that what she meant by commoner was that they "don't have a really good source of knowledge of the world". Nobody challenged this assertion when it happened during the session, so I brought it up to problematize in our discussion. Why

did we so silently accept these guards as *uneducated*? Surely, they must still know *some things*. Indeed, Feivel listed a few different land-based knowledges that a commoner might have, like catching fish, knowing when to sowing crops, etc. When I asked again, "why are they 'uneducated'", Terri replied that: "it comes from the academy, seeing knowledge as formalized". This marked the first instance of burgeoning conscientization in our session. Although I wanted to dig deeper into what this meant to Terri more personally, I felt it was more important to get a sense of how the group might respond to different codifications in the first session.

We moved on to discuss a scene where a high-ranking military official mentions to Geralt that he is unfamiliar with a certain term because he is not yet fluent in the "Common" tongue. The idea of a "Common Tongue" is popular in fantasy and generally serves as a *lingua franca* that is assumed to be understood and spoken by most if not all inhabitants of a fantasy world. Kade made the link between this and the idea of English as a "hyper language" that connects speakers across the globe. I asked the group: "why is English our hyper language?". Their answer was resounding: because the sun never sets on the British Empire.

At this point it was clear that historicization would likely come quite easily to this group. I wanted to see if we could take it a step further and relate our findings back to our own lives. I asked: "how do we feel about English being the hyper language?" Kade quickly replied that it was "useful", before making a puzzled expression. They paused before answering, more solemnly: "It's a threat." They mentioned learning about the endangerment of Inuinnaqtun, an Inuit language, and the struggle to conserve other Indigenous languages. Feivel connected this to "culture erasure" and eventually, to his own experiences with "code-switching". When he mentioned how he speaks Yiddish "mixed into the 'regular' language'" with his parents, we were all struck by just how natural it was for him to refer to English as the "regular" language.

This marked another important instance of conscientization in the sessions, notably since we managed to make the political personal for the first time.

A great realization can be quite taxing, however, and it didn't take long for the conversation to stall. I also started to find myself becoming increasingly tired. I tried returning to the very first codification I brought up at the beginning of the session before we had paused to discuss, but had no luck: I was tired, disengaged, and losing patience with how the group was responding to my increasingly feeble attempts at problem-posing. Hoping it might help me reconnect with the group, I asked if I could play the game for a bit. I did, and it lifted my spirits, but it also took me so far out of my role as facilitator that I failed to bring up any other codifications for the rest of the session.

Session Two

Everyone was present for the second session, so we decided to move forward with character creation. The group was surprisingly quiet when I asked whether we wanted to start with a sci-fi or fantasy game. I considered using this moment of silence as a decoding opportunity, but I was concerned that we might not have much time to try out all the games if I did. So, I made the decision for the group and suggested we start with the character creator in *The Outer Worlds*.

The Outer Worlds is a sci-fi RPG set in outer space. Not to be confused with the similarly named *Outer Wilds* (Mobius Digital, 2019) that is *also* set in outer space, The Outer Worlds leans heavily on classical role-playing elements such as "stat building": where the player character's strengths and weaknesses in-game are influenced by different numbered values that the player first sets during their character creation.

Terri decided to build her character first. I immediately found it harder to keep up with notetaking than I did with *The Witcher 3*. There were codifications in the game itself, in the choices Terri made, in the groups' comments about the game as well as in their reactions to Terri's decisions. I asked a few times if we could go back to an earlier screen so I could take note of what I had missed but I felt as though my requests intruded on the natural flow of gameplay, which I felt was important to preserve. However, we eventually reached an aptitude screen that I felt was too generative to ignore.

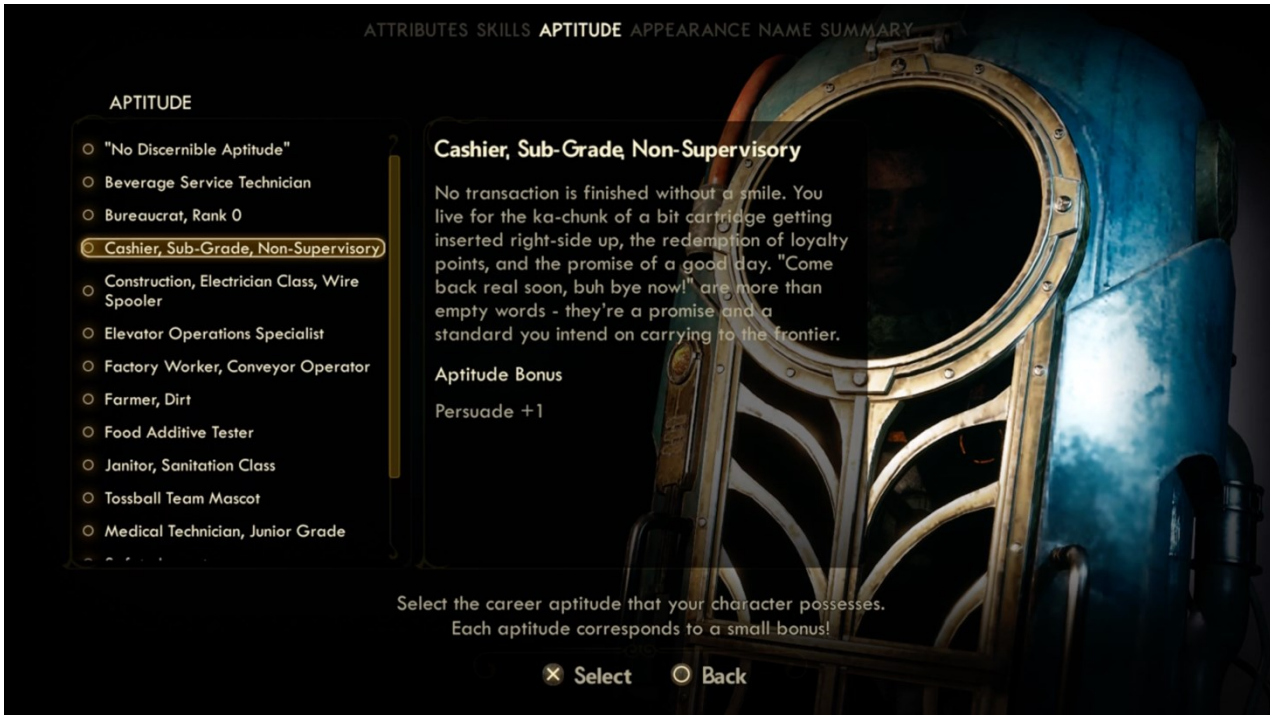

Figure 3. "Cashier, Sub-Grade, Non-Supervisory"

I requested that we pause for a second and asked the group if there was anything noticeable about the aptitudes. All the aptitudes available in *The Outer Worlds* intentionally reflect a blue-collar or entry-level white-collar position to suggest that the player character, who is an experimental space colonist, is of a "less desirable" class status. The group quickly picked up on this, highlighting that all the aptitudes are "low-level jobs". We discussed what it means to

do “low-level” work and considered how these types of jobs relate to different class statuses outside of the game. For example, we discussed how an “elevator specialist” might be considered a blue-collar labourer but could still bring in a very comfortable salary. I wanted to bring up my own family’s experience with wealth in blue-collar work, but the conversation quickly shifted.

Kade brought up that it is a common sci-fi trope for corporations to treat workers as disposable. The group seemed to find this very pertinent, and it gave us a new theme to work with: disposability. I asked: why would the developers of the game, Obsidian, make this type of in-game commentary. What’s in it for them? Willow brought up the fantasy of getting to “fuck the man”, and the irony of a large game studio like Obsidian, benefitting from the capitalist system all while critiquing it. I wanted to press further. In my enthusiasm, I earnestly asked, not realizing the innuendo, “who’s the man we wanna fuck?” We burst out laughing. The answer was relatively obvious considering what I knew about the politics of the group: it was the owner class, the bourgeoisie. A participant exclaimed: “Mr. Monopoly himself is gonna get pegged!” We laughed again, then stopped to think: what were the implications of us using this sort of language in this context? We metaphorically scratched our chins in contemplation but never actually answered the question. There was still character customizing to be done.

Once Terri finished creating her character in *The Outer Worlds*, I asked what we thought of our character. I was met with silence much like at the beginning of the session. I could’ve inquired on the silence at this point, seeing as how we’d gotten gameplay “out of the way”, but it didn’t feel right. I wanted to return to the points that had generated more enthusiastic discussion earlier in the session. So, I asked again about the implication of the colonists, who are all depicted as entry-level workers, being disposable. The conversation quickly picked back up. Terri provided a profound historical analysis on colonialism and disposability during the

Klondike Gold Rush. This time, however, the discussion did not end with historicization.

We related Terri's example back to the idea that people in power need to send off those with "nothing to lose" on perilous journeys. When I asked why we think this is, Terri had her answer ready: "because we haven't learnt that co-operation is effective". I pressed further, asking why, then, isn't co-operation *taught*. For a second, the gates of conscientization opened. We started to share, contrast, and question our own unique experiences learning about co-operation. It was fascinating and I didn't want to move on. But the research objective loomed in my mind. There were more games to play.

So, we did. We completed the character creators for *Dragon's Dogma*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and *Divinity Original Sin: 2*. However, none of these three games provided codifications that managed to prompt conscientization the way *The Outer Worlds* did. The group noticed this as well, and we discussed it together at the end of the session.

We noticed that the three other games focussed on customizing character *appearance*. Because most changes in character appearance don't impact the way the character is perceived or interacted with by other characters in the game *world*, the group didn't feel compelled to bring up them up. I highlighted how this differs starkly from the real world, where people's lives are indeed greatly impacted by their appearance, and asked why we think game developers don't carry over this experience into their role-playing games. We began an interesting discussion on how racism is and isn't depicted in video games, as well as different motivations as to *why*. However, I never managed to relate the discussion back to our personal experiences before the session ended.

Session Three

Kade was running late, so we decided to wait for them to arrive before starting. I found it touching how accommodating everyone in the group was. While waiting, we discussed the space. I was pleased to hear participants say they felt it had “cozy chalet vibes”. I was feeling connected with the group and excited to start the session.

When Kade arrived, I put in a *special request* that we dedicate the whole session to *Mass Effect 2.* Although we had agreed that I would play through each game’s tutorial, I felt strongly that we watch the opening cutscene together, which I’ve always found particularly evocative. The group had no problem with this, and Terri took the controller.

Upon starting the game, we were almost immediately faced with a mandatory gender selection for the player character. We cracked a joke together, which made me feel even more at ease with the group:

Figure 4. "Ah yes, the three genders: Male, Female, and Import ME1 Character."

As we watched the opening sequence, I took down a few points the group made about the way different characters dressed. Once we made it to the game's character creator, I noted, much like in Session Two, that our discussions were very surface level. When participants did make generative comments, there was just too much information moving around on screen for us to maintain a discussion and continue playing at the same time. Then, when the actual gameplay began, I found myself struggling, like I had in Session One, to figure out what was worth decoding.

There were many moments where I wanted to interrupt the gameplay to start a discussion, but this time I decided to bide my time. In these silences, however, Terri found opportunities to poke fun at my facilitation style: she'd point out random stuff on screen and sarcastically imitate my way of asking questions about things. I couldn't tell if this was her way of developing our rapport through humour or if she was showing frustration towards the problem-posing process.

Figure 5. "So, everyone, what do you think of the shape of the station?" (Terri)

When the gameplay eventually came to a lull, I prompted a pause for discussion and asked what the group thought of the first part of the game. Much like in Session One, the group's replies were essentially a *review* of how well the game performed as a role-playing experience. Though I felt the urge to steer the discussion in a different direction, I was also curious whether a different facilitation style could be more generative and decided to experiment with a less directive approach. Suffice to say, it was a mess. So many different ideas, topics, and themes started bouncing around and I just couldn't keep track of them all. Though I knew I needed to rein the discussion back in, somehow, I also felt guilty at the prospect of breaking off what was still an interesting and enjoyable conversation for the group. I languished in this state for longer than I'd like to admit. I'm not sure what broke me out of it, but at some point, I managed to draw my attention to a specific generative theme that kept coming back up: *player choice*.

Thinking of ways I might politicize the discussion, I asked: "what does it mean for a game studio to care about player choice?" The conversation kicked off on an interesting note, with Terri making a point that "everyone wants to play the hero"; however, the topic quickly shifted. When Willow replied stating that earlier video games didn't expect players to project themselves onto the character the same way modern RPGs do, I felt a strong personal need to step outside my role as facilitator and disagree. However, my reactive positioning just steered the conversation further away from my original aim.

Eventually, we were interrupted by campus security, who had received an incident report over our presence in the building. Once I confirmed my credentials and authorization to be in the space, the security agent left and we resumed the discussion, albeit a bit shaken. The group began discussing the implementation of player choice in other games, which I found difficult to follow because I wasn't familiar with many of the titles that were being mentioned.

In an attempt to try and reconnect with the group, I shared something I thought I knew about one of the games that had been mentioned, but I turned out to be mistaken. Yet when Terri corrected me on the matter, instead of apologizing and thanking her, I doubled down on my statement. My ego was bruised from feeling like the session wasn't going the way *I* wanted, and it was affecting my behaviour with the group. I felt bad and started to withdraw from the conversation.

Taking space gave me time to cool off and remember my role. I noticed the discussion had moved far, far beyond our initial codification. I decided to intervene, and frankly stated that I wanted to return to the original question: "what does it mean for a game studio to care about player choice?" This brought us back into a problem-posing mindset for a spell, but it didn't last long. The group made a few points on corporate interests and the ways game designers can resist them, but once they tied it all back to capitalism, the conversation stalled, and the group went back to reviewing the quality of the game.

At this point, I was feeling sorely disconnected from the group and wasn't sure how to move forward. I wondered if being more open about how things were going on my end could bring us closer. I decided to share that I'd been experimenting with being more hands-off in the session and mentioned some of the related challenges, like how I struggled to keep up during discussions on games I wasn't familiar with. I mentioned feeling like our conversations were *deeper* when I was asked more specific questions, and the group seemed to agree. I wondered, though if we all understood this notion of "depth" similarly.

From this conversation, we decided to try working with a specific codification again, as we had done in Session One. I brought up the first codification I noticed at the beginning of the session: how different video game characters were *dressed*.

Figure 6. Miranda's outfit is not like the others.

The group effortlessly made links between the aesthetics of various character's dress and themes of fascism, order, and control. Both Terri and Kade highlighted how one character's unusual jumpsuit designated her as a person of importance in the opening sequence. They both qualified her outfit as "unique" and "valuable", prompting Terri to draw a link between the two concepts. When I asked her about this, she said it made her think of a supply and demand chart. This made me think of the last session, where, unprompted, the group began discussing the extent to which co-operation was taught to them in school.

Wanting to return to that place of personal connection, I asked the group where we'd all learnt about supply and demand. I had high hopes that this line of questioning would prompt us to relate our own lived experiences to what we'd seen in the game, but it didn't happen. We all

gave different responses, and I wanted to dig into the *why*, but before I had the chance the topic shifted again to something unrelated. I felt like the group was tacitly pushing away my attempts to relate to their personal experiences. I wanted to respect this unspoken boundary. So, I didn't probe any further.

Session Four

I did not feel good after Session Three. It was clear that the group had little difficulty *historicising* our codifications or relating them to specific limit-situations. However, I struggled to motivate participants to talk about these themes in relation to their own lives and lived experiences. I wondered about the role I played in this.

During my journalling, I committed to apologizing to Terri for having been so stubborn. I also journalled through a lot of other, complicated feelings. Everyone in the group knew I was studying Freirean pedagogy and was looking at how different facilitation styles and video games could encourage critical discussion, but I never elaborated further on what conscientization actually is. I didn't want to prime the group to respond in ways that they might think were "good" or that pleased me because they aligned with what is "expected" from Freirean pedagogy. I felt guilty, like I was withholding knowledge - a cardinal Freirean sin. Still, I was worried, especially knowing the groups' political inclinations, that if I "sold" them on the idea of conscientization, then I would no longer be able to effectively answer my research questions.

I shared this concern with someone close to me, and their response surprised me. How naïve of me to think that, by introducing the group to Freirean pedagogy that they would somehow magically know *exactly* how to change their responses to fit *exactly* what is expected of the decoding process. I got the tough love I needed to hear: I was operating from a fundamental misunderstanding of how conscientization works. Even if every participant in the

group had read every one of Freire's books, their experiences of conscientization would still be unique and, as such, still prone to being impacted by either the types of games selected or my own abilities as a facilitator.

So, I came to Session Four with a spring in my step. I apologized to Terri for "having been an ass" in the previous session and was profoundly touched by her gratitude and understanding. Then, I gave a brief lecture on Freire. I shared what I knew with so much passion and vigour that I didn't take any notes. What I remember feeling, however, was *resolution*: I felt connected to the group again.

After learning about Freire's context and how his pedagogy came to be, we had a very interesting discussion on the applicability of such a pedagogy in our current educational landscape. We talked about ways of knowing, understanding, connecting and communicating our reality. Nearly half an hour passed before we realized we hadn't even touched the PlayStation. This was exactly what worried me in the character creation session — that if I dared open Pandora's box to start a discussion around something unrelated to the games, we might never have time to get back to them. But this fatalist line of thinking no longer had any bearing on me. I didn't have to control everything for things to turn out alright. I just had to have faith.

We moved on to play *Horizon Zero Dawn*. I took significantly fewer notes this session. I'd been reflecting on my notes and how I'd been taking them. By Session Four, I'd understood that my facilitation abilities suffered when I focussed too strongly on taking extensively detailed fieldnotes. Instead, I chose to focus on capturing the generative words, and eventually themes, that emerged throughout the session. This was a difficult decision, as I knew it meant the available data I would have for later analysis wouldn't be as detailed. My priorities had changed, however. It no longer mattered to me if I had the most detailed notes in the world if I ultimately

failed to nurture a generative educational relationship with the group.

Indeed, it was in Session Four that I began to find my voice as a facilitator. When Willow began playing Horizon Zero Dawn, Kade and Feivel, who had both played the game already, started having a conversation on their own on an unrelated topic. Willow didn't say anything but seemed distracted. I certainly felt distracted. In a past session I might have thought it more appropriate not to intervene so that things could continue to unfold "naturally". However, after the previous session, through my journalling and discussion, I began to feel more strongly about my duty to the group and our dynamic. And I really wanted to be able to focus on what was happening in the game. So, I told Kade and Feivel that I found their conversation distracting. They were receptive and apologetic. Throughout the rest of the session, our attention stayed on the game. This made it much easier to facilitate the post-game discussion.

I also decided I was no longer going to attempt decoding anything *during* gameplay. I concentrated on highlighting codifications made by the group that I thought would make for useful discussion, *after* we'd played a bit. Some interesting examples that I wrote down included:

- Kade mentioned that Aloy, the game's protagonist, wasn't "very ripped" for a "caveman". Terri asked why Kade thought Aloy was a caveman. Kade replied it was because the tribes were "low-tech".
- Upon encountering one of the matriarchal tribes in the game, Willow questioned the tribe's depiction of being old or primitive. In response, Terri asserted that, historically, matriarchal societies have been more primitive.
- At one point Willow wasn't sure which path to follow in-game and eventually decided not to take any path at all, instead directing the player character through dense bush. In response, Feivel exclaimed: "Fuck paths!".

I never did return to any of the examples above for further discussion. Instead, Terri made a comment at the end of gameplay that ended up shaping the rest of our session. In Horizon Zero Dawn, Aloy is eventually sent off by her adoptive father to slay a great beast on her own. As we concluded this fight, we reflected on the theme of *aloneness*.

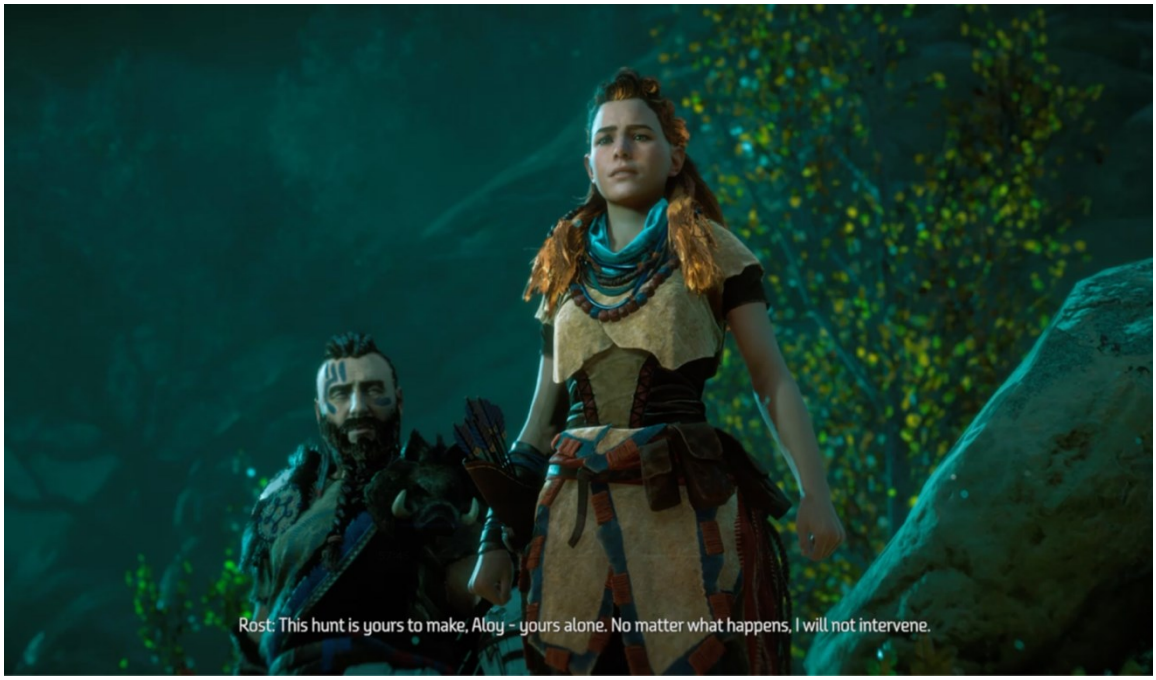

Figure 7. Aloy must do it alone.

However, instead of drawing attention to it as a *narrative* theme present in the game, Terri brought it up in the context of *game mechanics*. In the game, Aloy is not only alone in a narrative sense — she is the only character the player can control throughout the entire game.

We began to relate this to some of the other games we'd played, where even in games where the player is thematically part of a larger group, the cutscene angles and player controls still ultimately direct to the main character. In Terri's words, it was "interesting how games make you a part of the group but make you do it alone".

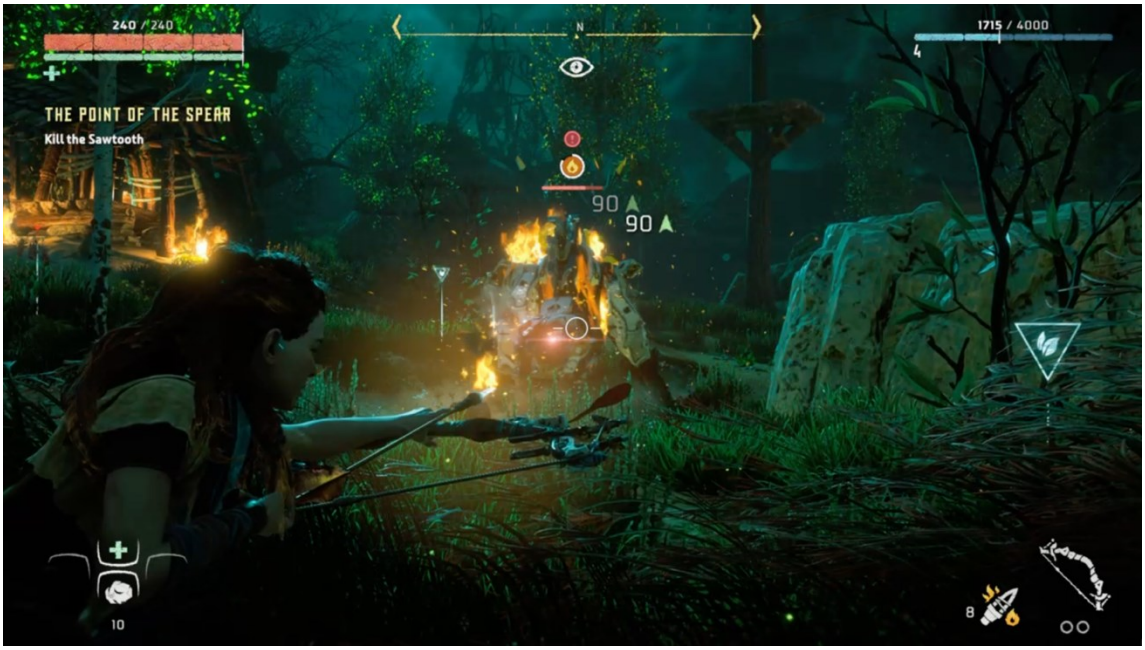

Figure 8. And so she does.

In response, Feivel asked the group: "what would a video game look like where you could actually experience the full group?". It was an interesting question, and a compelling example of praxis, but I felt it was a bit precocious. On one hand, I was excited to see Feivel's conscientization in this light. However, I wasn't convinced that we had explored our burgeoning theme enough to begin discussing new game design. So, at the risk of shutting down what could have been a highly generative conversation in its own right, I intervened. Instead, I asked the group why these games emphasized solo gameplay, even when it clashes with the game's narrative.

The group began discussing several social theories to explain the emphasis on solo control mechanics in RPGs. Feivel hinted at it being a "cultural thing", with Kade explicitly attributing it to the role of the "Great man theory" in Western canon. Building upon this, Willow brought up more Western social conventions like individualism and meritocracy. I noticed that the group was eager to name *theories*, big intellectual ideas that conveniently summarized deeper

points which remained unsaid. There was a distance. I wondered how to bridge it.

We had a brief interruption at the door, which I left to investigate. Upon returning to the group, I was surprised to learn that the group had chosen not to continue the existing conversation but instead turned to an unrelated topic in my absence. I was touched by this but also found myself feeling a bit concerned, even sad — did the group feel like they didn't have permission to be in conversation without me? I mentioned that they could keep the discussion going even if I wasn't there, but they were insistent that they just wanted me to be included. I was flooded with humility: I saw authoritarianism where they saw equality. How presumptuous! In that moment, I felt reconnected. So, I took the opportunity to try and bridge the distance.

I asked the group what all those great terms and theories they'd named about being alone really meant for them in their own lives. Kade mentioned appreciating when video games "mak[e] you feel alone". Terri immediately latched onto this, and in a still-sarcastic-yet-surprisingly-serious tone, asked: "oh, so you have a bias against working together?". This prompted the group to reflect on whether they preferred working alone or in groups, with only Terri identifying herself as preferring the latter. Feivel made a comment about his preference for solitude being to his detriment, which brought Willow to mention how "asking for help makes you weak". I asked them whether that was something they actually believed and they responded that it was something they were trying to *unlearn*. This prompted the group to share how we'd all felt disempowered from asking for help in our lives and communities at times.

I was glad we had begun sharing our feelings and felt we could go even further. So, I asked the group *from whom* we had all learnt the struggle for asking from help. Willow started to answer, but they barely managed to get a word out before Feivel blurted out: "My father!". We all broke into laughter, and I felt the ice finally break. We spent the rest of the session discussing

concrete experiences with our families and their histories that helped shape our understandings of *self-sufficiency.* Our first generative theme.

I didn't want the session to end. I learnt so much about each member of the group and the worlds from which they came. The session ended on what felt like a high note. I looked forward to the next one.

Session Five

We started Session Five by discussing how we wanted to conclude the project. Although we all wanted to have one more session together before the focus group, it was difficult to plan around the upcoming Easter holiday. The university was going to be closed on April 1st for Easter, and I didn't have the resources to host our focus group elsewhere. Someone proposed that we just extend the length of our final session together so we could play one last game and *then* have our focus group on the same evening. The group seemed to like the idea, but I wasn't so sure. I wanted to speak up, but I already felt so bad for having not planned around the holidays properly that I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I felt dishonest in this silence and the guilt stayed with me for the rest of the session.

We moved on to play *Divinity: Original Sin 2* (D:OS2). We decided to prioritize it over *Dragon Age: Inquisition* since we had already played a game by BioWare (*Mass Effect 2*). We also didn't mind not having a full session for *Dragon's Dogma* since we saw a bit of it during the character creation session and we didn't find it terribly generative.

Despite feeling guilty over our scheduling woes, I was looking forward to playing *D:OS2*, especially after the last session. The game has an interesting way of approaching character control and storytelling: although the player is assigned a main playable character at

the game's start, eventually other playable characters are met and each own has their own unique questline. When controlling different characters, the in-game world reacts differently based on each character's fantasy race, background, gender, and unique skills. I was curious to see how participants would contrast this gaming experience, which embeds the notion of having a collective party into its very gameplay mechanics, with the other games we had played to date, which emphasize playing as a single character.

That said, *DOS:2* still presents the initial player character as starting off *alone*. Furthermore, I had grossly underestimated just how many real-world hours it takes to actually encounter the other playable characters in-game. For that reason, I spent our time gaming together in a frazzled state — whenever I thought the game would *finally* introduce the ability to play as a different character, it wasn't yet the case. This caused me a lot of frustration, which in turn challenged my ability to facilitate in a way that lived up to my values. I began feeling increasingly insecure in my role as a facilitator as I became repeatedly confronted by how little I truly remembered about the game. I struggled deeply against this feeling and retaliated by assuming an authoritative stance about what I *thought* I knew, rather than accept that I am indeed a fallible human who just simply can't, despite my deepest wishes, know everything.

Early in the game, there is a specific key hidden in an unusual location that unlocks an optional reward chest. Feivel, who was playing, was having a hard time finding the key. It wasn't essential to continue with the game in any way, but we were all curious about it. I couldn't remember where the key was, or whether it even existed, and pondered this aloud to the group. When I announced that I wanted to look it up, Terri asked me why I felt the need to be searching for information out-of-game. This comment struck me as bizarre, as I thought that was supposed to be my role as facilitator. However, it was only after the focus group, and indeed after much

reflection in writing about our time together, that I realized that Terri was inviting me to *problematize my own role as facilitator*. It was another acknowledgement of my being an equal. Unfortunately, I was not able to fully grasp the depth of her remark at that point and proceeded instead to engage in a bizarre power struggle against both myself and the group throughout the rest of the session.

At one point, I asked Feivel if I could try playing to see if I could get us introduced to the first playable character more quickly. He handed me the controller and it didn't take long before I, and the rest of group, realized that I *really* had no idea what I was doing.

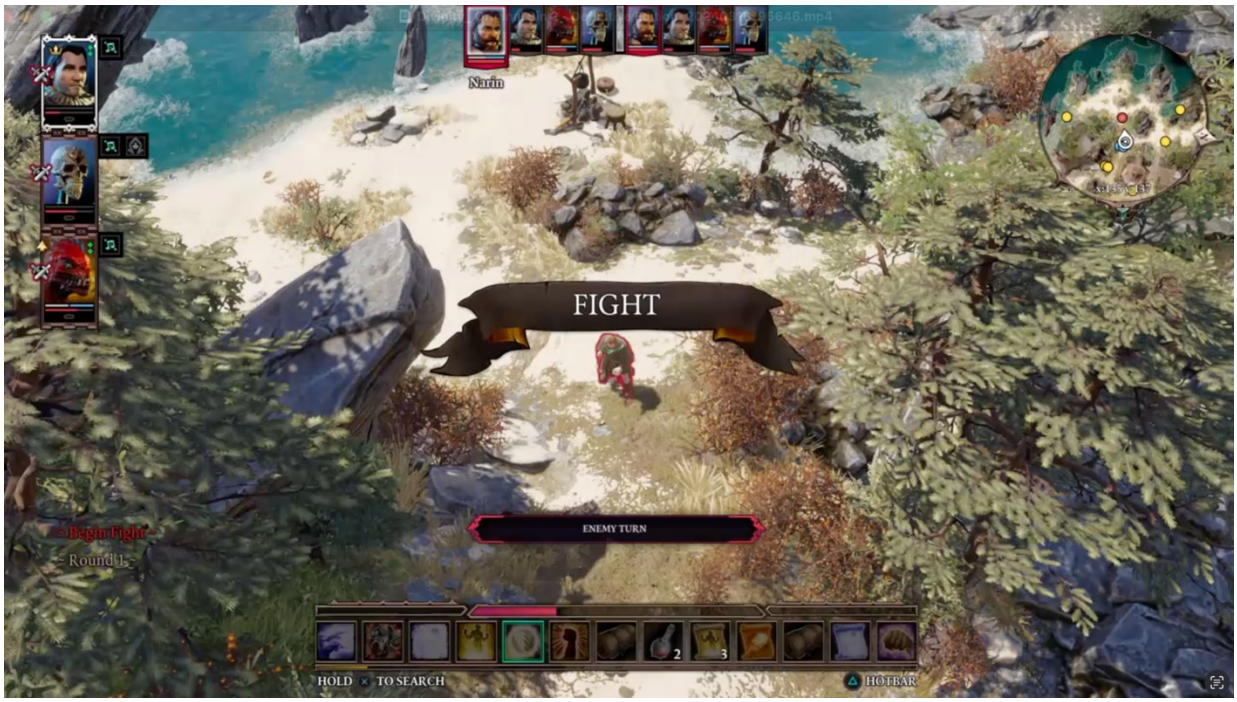

Figure 9. "This was not supposed to happen."

My attempt to regain both metaphorical and literal control of the session fell flat. I kept sending the character into dead ends and into combat situations that were not getting us any closer to meeting the other playable characters. The final straw was when I took the character into an abandoned encampment only to be ambushed into a high-level fight. Confronted again by

the uncomfortable reality that I knew far less about the game than I thought I did, I angrily turned off the game. Once again, my ego was deeply bruised.

Yet, the group was there for me. Before I could even open my mouth to address the tension and usher us into a period for discussion, Willow smiled at me and asked the group: "Any generative themes?" We all laughed together, and I felt a bit more at ease. We attempted decoding parts of the game's narrative but ultimately concluded that there was too much information missing to actually problematize anything. We tried going back to the theme of individualism that we had revealed in last session, but I was tired, and didn't facilitate the way I'd had hoped. We spoke theoretically about how we all related to different characters but were distanced from both the coded object at hand, as well as our own lives. I felt our togetherness, yet I also felt we were far from one another.

Session Five was not without value, however. Among our discussions were interesting remarks made and echoed by various members of the group about some of the shortcomings of the gaming circle format. We discussed challenges related to only playing the early scenes of games, having limited gameplay time, as well as having too many games to choose from. I realized these were important topics for the focus group and expressed to the group what I'd been feeling all along — that it might be best to drop playing the final game and just hold the focus group the following week. The group agreed, though my heart felt heavy. At the time, I felt like I was taking something away from *them*. It has only been with hindsight that I've come to understand that I was actually taking something away from *us*.

It was difficult for me to mourn that which I did not believe was mine to lose.

The Focus Group

After Session Five, I wrote my longest journal entry of the project. I will spare the details, but I was terribly dramatic, and terribly hard on myself. In the time between the end of Session Five right up until the start of the focus group on the following Monday, I found myself bothered not only by the practical challenges associated with running the project, but my very own ways of knowing. Rather than embrace the reflexive criticality behind Freire's idea of "epistemological curiosity" (Freire, 1998), I languished in a bizarre space of epistemological self-flagellation instead. If only I could have thought about things *differently*, more *creatively*. This line of thinking only compounded my suffering, as I became equally, if not even more troubled by my insistence on perverting the reflexive process into a cruel and unusual form of intellectual punishment.

I carried this grief throughout the week and began to dread the upcoming focus group. On the evening of our final meeting, I was absolutely overrun by anxiety. Yet once I saw everyone gathered at our usual spot, bright-eyed and eager to discuss what we had all learnt together, my pain was instantly assuaged. The reverence I felt, and continue to feel, for this group of exceptional humans was profound. It was going to be alright. I set up a sound recorder in the centre of the round table and we all sat in our usual spaces.

Running the focus group was challenging but not overwhelmingly so. There were moments where people would talk over one another, and especially moments where individuals would branch off to discuss parallel topics that didn't necessarily relate to the discussion. Interestingly, I was less aware of this while facilitating the focus group — it only became transparent to me upon transcribing. Indeed, the act of transcription itself revealed a multitude of conversational layers that I had completely missed while we were in person. These layers would

grow deeper as I undertook my thematic analysis, which I present in the following chapter.

After the focus group, I took down everyone's sociodemographic information and presented the group with the debriefing statement I had prepared (see Appendix 5). We laughed over just how little the debrief, which I had written many months before the project started, actually touched on the realities of doing Freirean pedagogy in practice. We had learnt so much together, and in our final moments together as the Digital Decodings family, I finally understood why Freire wrote so much about *love*.

Chapter 5: Thematic Findings

In this chapter, I present the results of my thematic analysis. I begin by presenting the learning experiences and educational outcomes of the project. Then, I discuss the specific benefits and challenges of using video games in a Freirean culture circle.

Digital Decodings: A Quest for (Unexpected) Learning

I anticipated Digital Decodings to be an educational experience from the start. I knew I would learn much from the process of developing and running the project and hoped that participants would learn from our sessions together, too. Indeed, the group reported finding the gaming circle "interesting" (Terri) as well as "educational" (Feivel). Though it had its ups and downs, Digital Decodings was ultimately a rich site of learning where frameworks began to shift, conscientization deepened, and new ways of thinking grew.

Shifting Frameworks

All participants described a "subtle shifting of framework or viewpoint" (Willow) or a "change in perspective" (Feivel) as a result from the sessions. Kade described this process as a "shift in narrative", where:

> **Kade:** …instead of saying like, 'oh, society thinks x', we had to start saying, we had to start *realizing* [that] *we* think x, because it's been internalized and like, it's not as detached as you think you are. And even if you know that that's like a reality that's technically not correct, it's still a part of your reality and you have to recognize the fact that like, oh yeah, I do also think this way, even if it's not something I can support with arguments.

This "introspection" was repeatedly brought up by participants:

> **Terri:** Yeah, when you introspect and think about your thought, you know it's wrong, but it's still your first thought—
> **Kade:** Exactly, yeah.
> **Terri:** —and if you don't have the time to analyse it, it's what-it's actually what *you* think,

not what the society thinks.

Feivel: Yeah.

This resembles what Freire has called a shift from *naïve* or *magic consciousness* to *critical consciousness*, where: “magic consciousness simply apprehends facts and attributes them a superior power by which it is controlled and to which it must therefore submit [whereas] critical consciousness is integrated with reality" (Freire, 2005, p. 39). The “fact” here is that we as people do not just passively consume the beliefs and values transmitted to us through our cultures — we are always active in the construction of reality.

Through their participation in Digital Decodings, participants entered in a process where in Freirean terms, they began to consciously see themselves as “knowing Subjects” (Freire, 2005). Feivel often referred to this process as one of “personal introspection”:

> **Feivel:** … there was in like, the personal introspection and like, even when we start speaking about, I know that like, later in that session when we started talking about, ‘OK, why do you think that is’, and I know that, ah, I don't even remember what it was but it was something about like, ah, our parental attitudes and we were all saying we had the same parental attitudes—
>
> **Willow:** Mmm.
>
> **Feivel:** —but then it was like ‘OK why do you think that is’?
>
> **Ian:** For self-sufficiency.
>
> **Feivel:** Yeah, that's what it is. And then it's like, why do you think that is? And I go back to the Holocaust, you go back to the Irish Holocaust—
>
> **Ian:** Yeah.
>
> [laughter]
>
> **Ian:** *Yeah...*
>
> **Feivel:** And it's like...*that*...but it's-it's… [pauses] we wouldn't have done that previously, we would've probably more likely just been [like]: ‘Oh our parental generation is like that’—
>
> **Ian:** Mhmm.
>
> **Feivel:** —and that-and that's like as close to a personal introspection—
>
> **Ian:** —but it came very spontaneously from you.

Feivel: No, absolutely, yeah.

Ian: And I remember you were like "The Holocaust" and we all laughed—

[laughter]

Ian: —'cuz it was like... 'duh' but you were like, no, we're serious, and then we talked about it.

Feivel: Yeah, no, because then I could like talk about like, my family history of my grandmother and great-grandmother and things.

Indeed, it was this element of personal introspection, *occurring outwardly in group dialogue*, mediated by a coded object, *then* historicized, that seemed to help participants gain consciousness of their role as Subjects (Freire, 2005).

Deepening Conscientization

While Feivel and Kade spoke actively about noticing this shift towards "critical introspection" throughout the sessions, Willow tended to discuss the project's outcomes in hypothetical terms:

Willow: Like we said, even if this concept exists, I know about, y'know, generational trauma or whatever 'isms', like it's one thing to be able to say that like, OK I know that y'know, we all have these implicit biases, and [it's] a different thing to really see yourself have that and to act on it and like, yeah. Yeah. I think that's something that could come out of this.

When I asked Willow whether this was something that did actually come out for them, they acknowledged that it wasn't. However, their perspective seemed to shift later during the focus group, highlighting the ongoing nature of their conscientization:

Willow: Yeah, I'm just… I'm just thinking about it now, like, what I… had said earlier about it being... not about, or like... less about the things that I'm already critical of, but the things that are just like... that I'm silently accepting, that are just like… "well that's how-that's how the world is". And it's *those* things that I want to be more...aware of. Um, and so maybe… like, just like changing *how* I am critical of things moving forward.

Participants also mentioned noticing this change in their thinking outside of the sessions. For Feivel, it started happening while watching the police drama *NYPD Blue* with his wife after the sessions:

> **Feivel:** I have started… not just, like, being critical of the show, but internally, being critical of like...what I'm praising it for, what I'm not praising it for, why am I praising it for that, is it really doing that the way I think it is? Like, being aware of a term like 'copaganda' and being aware of my own personal privilege is not just enough. It's like, hey, I'm still missing something or, 'is that really the case'? Or how does it still get away with this and realize that it's a show about New York cops in the 90's, where like stop-and-frisk is viewed as a positive thing there.

Kade echoed a similar experience watching the murder mystery series *Columbo*:

> **Kade:** … I realized that, eventually, [while watching Columbo] that I was like, 'oh we're only seeing like rich people who have servants in LA'. So, like, I don't know if that's a thought I would've had without [the sessions]."

Although Terri mentioned not having had the capacity to problematize her own media use in the time between our last session and the focus group, she still expressed a keen "desire to, in a silly way, approach media analysis and… go deeper in thinking about things". This shed some light on the motivations behind her light mockery of me in the sessions:

> **Terri:** I feel like I definitely, like, next time I watch like, something with someone and like we make comments about it, I will be that little shit [laughs] and ask like 'what, why? Why did you say that?'
>
> **Ian:** And would you think that would be that way—
>
> **Terri:** Oh, I learnt that from you.
>
> [laughter]
>
> **Terri:** And it's gonna be funny to me thinking back that like...that I'm aping you, but it will also lead to actual conversations unfolding.
>
> **Kade:** It's an inside joke, it's—
>
> **Ian:** Well and that's the thing I always put in my notes like… 'Terri mockingly said…' and be like, well she was mocking but she's not, like she's asking seriously but she's just saying it in her tone that's like, kind of making fun of me—

Terri: Yes.
Ian: —but we're gonna have a questi-like, it still leads to a discussion.
Terri: Yes.

Terri wasn't the only one who had internalized my specific problem-posing approach, as Kade echoed:

> **Kade:** "Every once in a while, watching something, I will think like, 'Oh what would Ian ask about this?' or like, 'what would I say if I had a question about this piece of media'?

Interestingly, Kade's response also suggests that they kept not only in mind *my* way of facilitating, but that they were also conscious of their *own* consciousness in questioning media outside of the sessions.

Adding New Ways of Thinking

Participants frequently acknowledged that they already had a certain level of critical awareness before joining the project. Still, they found the experience "added new perspectives and new ways of thinking" (Terri) about "how the world works … how you interact with it, and how it affects your life" (Willow). Both Willow and Terri brought up the risks associated with assuming that a more literate or even politically left-leaning group "already knows" about certain forms of oppression:

> **Willow:** I feel like even...or maybe *especially*, in a group like ours...where we're like, yeah, we know, we understand, like, how harmful it is, and what there's uh, the ideas are, but like...acknowledging that like, we still hold those biases is not something that we always, uh… have to confront.

For Terri, the experience helped her "have a better understanding about how baked in it is for the people who have [oppressive] views." Participants often discussed the project's ability to help surface unspoken beliefs, making them more real for groups who might claim to already be

"critical enough", but still know the struggle for liberation isn't over. In doing so, participants formulated their own understandings and applications of Freirean pedagogy for our group:

> **Feivel:** Feels almost like the goal of Freirean [education] for people like *us* with our background, and as much as I can speak for everybody else here at the table [Terri laughs], is one where… it's not about introducing concepts, it's about turning off the bullshit part to be able to say, no no no, this is like an actual 'you' thing.

Some participants went further, analyzing comments made within the focus group in relation to Freirean pedagogy in general:

> **Willow:** I'm just thinking now, with the, like being critical and then doing the introspection about the criticism, I feel like, that's... that's interesting, but in terms of like, Freirean pedagogy kind of stuff, I don't feel like that's going to be... it's [more about] the stuff that you silently accept.

Learning about Freire

Participants reported a strong interest in, and appreciation for, having learnt about Freire and Freirean pedagogy in general. During the focus group, for example, Feivel named hearing one of the stories I shared about Freire as being "the most explicit moment [that stuck out to him]" from the sessions. This was fascinating to me: In all the literature I'd consulted, I couldn't find any research where participants mentioned learning about Freire himself as an educational outcome. Yet it ended up being a critical component of our learning journey.

As Kade put it, "hearing Freire's theories… meant that we each became our own facilitators." Indeed, participants reported a continuing interest in further engaging with Freirean thought after the project: Terri was reading *The Politics of Education,* Feivel and Willow were both thinking of ways to incorporate Freirean pedagogy in their work as educators, and Kade had been making links between Freire's work and their studies in linguistics.

Indeed, participants mentioned on several occasions during the focus group that they had

wished I'd done the "Freire 101" far earlier in the sessions. I found this especially interesting considering how much I struggled with deciding whether to discuss Freire with the group at all. Learning about Freire helped participants shift their focus from "reviewing" or performing a more literary analyses of the games we played to thinking about them *politically*.

Participants also acknowledged the composition of their group in the matter. Though I had some initial concerns that a lack of political diversity in the group might hold back this type of discussion, participants felt the opposite. Instead, they highlighted how having shared politics created a sense of *safety* in the group which, in turn, "made it a lot easier for us to talk about our politics" (Feivel). Since nobody felt they needed to debate their right to exist, it was "easier to be vulnerable" (Willow). This vulnerability plays a key role in helping participants then relate the political to the *personal* (Wallerstein & Sanchez-Merki, 1994).

Learning about Freire wasn't the only thing that affected our group experiences in Digital Decodings, however. The fact that we worked with video games had an impact as well. Themes emerged in relation to the unique qualities of video games that affected not only participants' experiences in the sessions but also my own as group facilitator.

Working with Video Games: A Double-Edged Sword

Video games are a unique form of media. As multimodal texts, they provide rich opportunities for analysis (Gee, 2018; Love, 2017; Stufft & Gillern, 2021). However, they can also bring unexpected challenges into an educational setting. Indeed, I found working with video games to be a truly double-edged experience in Digital Decodings. They provided many unique codifications to choose from, but it was easy to get lost in the noise. At times, the line between "technical feature" and "technical difficulty" became blurred. Still, video games are an enjoyable, interesting format to work with, even though I found them a bit *too* fun at times.

Unique Decoding Opportunities

The greatest benefit I found working with video games was the rich selection of unique codifications present in each game. Video games feature a range of multimodal symbols, or "modes" (Gee, 2018), that influence how they are "read" (Stufft & Gillern, 2021). Most of these modes aren't exclusive to video games: books also have written words and static pictures and films also have moving pictures, spoken language, as well as sounds and music, too. However, video games are comprised of multiple "systems" (Gee, 2018). These systems make up not only the *content* of a video game, but *how* it is played, as well as how the player is *instructed* to play it. Each system in itself is multimodal and provides endless unique decoding opportunities.

For example, in *Horizon Zero Dawn*, participants found thematic parallels between the story's narrative, as expressed through the words spoken by characters in-game, and how the game was actually *played.* Not only did the characters *talk* about Aloy being alone, but *playing* Aloy's character reinforced this theme of loneliness. Character control in particular was an especially significant game system for participants. After playing *Horizon Zero Dawn*, the group started to take note of how some games "make you a part of the group but make you do it alone" (Terri). Although "shifting between multiple games…and introducing the systems of new games [took] up a certain amount of brain space" (Feivel), having opportunities to reveal this "thematic congruence" between games, which became a codification in its own right, proved especially generative.

That said, not all codification opportunities were as useful. User interface (UI) elements like "map screens, directional indicators, inventory screens, health bars, weapon wheels, damage meters, and information about enemies" (Gee, 2018, p. 18) were especially challenging to work with. Their generative themes were just too deeply hidden away for the group to see them as

coded objects. I don't want to dismiss their generative potential entirely, however. I do think some of the issues we had with them were largely a result of poor facilitation on my part. That said, we just didn't have enough time in the project to be faffing about with codifications that were too enigmatic.

Indeed, participants showed a preference for games that had clear *worldbuilding*, especially those that showed clear divisions in social class. These divisions, and the generative themes they conveyed, were much clearer in elements that pertained to the "game world", like characters or dialogue, rather than the user interface. Good worldbuilding was something I already had in mind when I selected the games for Digital Decodings. One fact I neglected, however, was that not every game's worldbuilding is made sufficiently clear *in the early game*.

> **Feivel**: …you can watch the first act of a movie, and get, and the goal of the first act is to establish the world. Um... but the first act of a video game is several hours longer than a movie.
> **Willow**: Mhmm, yeah.
> **Terri:** And... yeah. Video games aren't exactly built one-to-one with a five-act-structure.

For example, participants found *The Witcher 3* particularly noteworthy in how it delivered a socially "realistic" fantasy world experience, right from the beginning of the game:

> **Feivel**: … the way that the Witcher works is you're dropped into the world [and] because of the systems and the way that dialogue is delivered and things like that, people feel more real because they react to you more spontaneously.
> **Terri**: Yeah.
> **Feivel**: … like you walk up to this villager and this villager cowers, right?
> **Ian**: Yeah.
> **Feivel**: Like you don't have to start-, you don't to prompt them with speech and read a text box.
> **Terri**: I mean it's part of the goal of like all the video games, like all of those people are living in a fantasy world but we want to make them feel as if like, they're real people. So, we base their reactions on what a real person would react to seeing this big buff guy walk by with two big swords on his back.

Feivel: Yeah.

This was also the case with *The Outer Worlds*, which Terri highlighted as being the only game in which "the tone of the worldbuilding was transpiring through the character builder." Although *Divinity Original Sin: 2*, *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, and *Dragon's Dogma* all also contained codifications depicting social inequalities, we did not play far enough into the games to truly see them.

Technical Challenges and Agentic Choices

If most of the games I chose did indeed have good worldbuilding, just not at the beginning of the game, why then did I choose to only play the beginning of each game in the sessions? Unlike movies or TV shows, which can be scrubbed with a media player to reach specific scenes, most video games cannot be "played back" in the same sense. Video games usually use *save files* to record a player's progress in-game. So, in order to present scenes from multiple points in a game, one would have to actually sit down and play the game until they arrive at the correct scenes and make a corresponding number of save files. This is what Kadakia (2005) did to present specific moral choices from the classic RPG *Morrowind* (Bethesda, 2002) to her seventh grade language arts class. Kadakia reported that this took only an hour of her time; however, *Morrowind* was released over 20 years ago, and games have changed a lot since then. *Dragon's Dogma*, for example, only allows one save file per game, and it took me nearly an hour just to get through the tutorial of *Horizon Zero Dawn*, alone.

There *are* specific tools that can effectively "scrub" though video game footage (see Dixon, 2023); however, they are not readily accessible and can be challenging to use. For games that only allow one save file, creating multiple player profiles on the same console effectively increases the number of save files one can choose from. However, this doesn't solve the issue of

needing to physically sit down and *play* through a video game in order to access certain scenes. While this may not be an issue for a highly motivated facilitator who only wants to work with one game, it certainly impacted my facilitation experience and resulted in my decision to only have the group play the opening sequence of each game.

The multimodal nature of video games also made it difficult to prepare for the decoding exercises themselves. Having to sift through all of a game's different codifications, in real time, while other people were playing and discussing, was a *massive* cognitive undertaking. Although my ability to prioritize taking note of certain codifications over others improved throughout the project, it was still a tall order. There were moments, especially during character creation, where notetaking became simply impossible due to the sheer number of elements constantly whizzing around the screen.

This affected our ability for discussion. Participants noted that whenever we would try and have conversation *while* gaming, we were often just "noticing" things on the screen, essentially narrating what was going on. If we paused to discuss and then tried to continue the conversation while playing again it would pull us "back to the surface-level" (Kade).

However, holding our discussions after gameplay had disadvantages, too. There was no guarantee that, just because I took note of a codification while the group was playing, participants would remember it the same way I did, or at all. Participants related this to the concept of *content density*, where if a game's content was "too dense, and we play for two hours, like...we're just not remembering stuff" (Terri).

Participants were not alone in this experience. Because we had multiple games to choose from, the limits of my memory were tested to the max. Often during the sessions I simply couldn't remember how a game was going to progress. And even if I did, all the games we

played had features like branching dialogue options and unique environmental interactions, virtually ensuring that no two playthroughs would be alike. The landscape was constantly changing.

Interestingly, these experiences gave rise to an unexpected dynamic of *equality* in the group. Although I found it incredibly embarrassing when *I* would forget or misunderstand something about a game, participants highlighted that it contributed to creating a "level playing field" (Feivel) in the group. For them, it was more important that the facilitator be "literate in coded objects" rather than "know every single thing about the game" (Willow). This echoes Aufderheide's (1991) point in working with film, that it "doesn't require knowing arcane technical details about film. But it does require critical understanding of media generally" (p. 35). Taking this point further, the Digital Decodings group even expressed that it would be *weird* for a facilitator know every game inside and out. For Willow, "discovering [the games] together makes it feel more like [the facilitator is] a part of the group".

Although playing multiple games made the facilitation task more involved, it also provided unique opportunities for participant agency in the group. Having a range of games to choose from meant that participants could accommodate their own play styles throughout the sessions. For example, one participant mentioned during the Session Zero that certain games could make them nauseous to watch, but not if they're actively playing. Since we had plenty of games for everyone to try, there was no problem having that participant just play the games that would've been difficult for them to watch.

Even the simple act of passing the controller around was an agentic experience for the group. When another participant got spooked by a spider crawling across the screen during *Dragon Age: Inquisition*, they passed me the controller as they recoiled. I was surprised that they

didn't just keep the controller as they looked away, but Terri noted that the actual "act of passing the controller assuages the pain a bit". Indeed, gameplay sharing was another element that participants mentioned when discussing the felt sense of equality in the group. Getting to play the games myself gave me opportunities to also be an active participant in the group experience.

Balancing Fun and Focus

Passing the controller not only contributed to a more equitable group dynamic, it was also *fun.* Participants were excited to try out different games, and visibly enjoyed their time spent gaming. I also enjoyed watching participants play and relished the moments I got to play myself (even when I made mistakes). This *fun* extended beyond our enjoyment of gameplay itself and shaped the general atmosphere of our sessions. Indeed, some of the first words participants used to describe their experience in the project were "enjoyable" (Willow) and "fun" (Kade).

Humour in particular was a resounding theme throughout the session. It didn't take too long before we were all comfortable cracking jokes and sharing laughs together. That said, our collective tendency to "goof off" sometimes cost us precious moments of criticality. For example, Albuquerque Mendes (2018) found that some of her adult learners were able to make critical connections between video game "glitches" they encountered in video games and real life. In Digital Decodings, however, the one glitch that we encountered while playing *The Witcher 3* was so funny to us that it ended up completely derailing the rest of the session.

Figure 10. Vesemir is not supposed to be a floating head.

Indeed, Tisdell (2008) found that pleasure in particular acts as both a facilitator *and* a deterrent of critical media literacy. Participants echoed Tisdell's finding that because discussion was "framed around video games [it was] easier to do" (Feivel). Indeed, participants showed no difficulty engaging in rich, nuanced discussions about the games they played. However, many of these discussions were essentially game "reviews" centered around how enjoyable they found a game to be rather than how it related to themes found in their own lives.

At the same time, understanding and valuing the role that *fun* played in the group was important. Making jokes, as well as reviewing the games, were ways participants connected with one another and developed trust. Indeed, this trust is the bedrock of critical group dialogue (Sambolín Morales, 2022; Wallerstein & Sanchez-Merki, 1994). That said, it still remained challenging for the group to "maintain a dialectic of pleasurable involvement and critical distance" (Shumway, 1989, p. 229), and I certainly had my own role to play in this.

Participants found humour in not only the games, but in the unique dynamics of their group relationship as well as in the problem-posing method itself. Indeed, Freirean pedagogy can quite frankly be incredibly bizarre at times, and playing video games only compounded this experience. Though I wasn't always particularly skilled at this, I found that leaning into the absurdity of our shared experiences increased our cohesion as a group. However, I had to make sure not go too far in this direction as to trivialize the process of conscientization.

Chaib and Martins (2010) have highlighted this "challenge for the educator… to provide a focus without dismissing the voices of participants in the dialogue." (p. 43). Indeed, participants referenced my "method of interrogation" (Feivel) in promoting "a focussing of attention or awareness [towards] the topics that we were talking about" (Willow). It took time, however, and a lot of experimentation in the sessions for me to reach this balance (and I still have much to learn). When I was too open and disengaged in my facilitation style, the conversations went everywhere and nowhere. Yet I also had moments where I shut down critical moments for dialogue when I tried to be more directed. I had to be present, own my role as facilitator, and *ask questions*, not just about the games, but about participants' own lives.

It was hard. I love video games. I often didn't want to have to be some big serious facilitator, I just wanted to play the games and chat about them. However, I had to remember my accountability to the group. Ultimately, Digital Decodings wasn't really about playing video games. It was about deepening conscientization, or, as Feivel once succinctly put it: "calling us on our bullshit". At the same time, it *was* about playing video games. Because we wouldn't have had the same experience had we done anything else.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I presented Digital Decodings: A Freirean "gaming circle" where a small group of participants and I decoded various video games in a non-formal setting. Participation in Digital Decodings was an educational experience for everyone involved. It shifted frameworks, deepened conscientization and added new ways of thinking that participants reported continuing to engage with after the sessions ended.

This research also sheds light on some of the benefits and challenges of working with video games in Freirean education. Because video games are a uniquely multimodal format, they provide decoding opportunities that other media formats cannot. Not all codifications found in video games are easy to work with, though. Games with clear worldbuilding may be more generative, but the worldbuilding needs to transpire through the parts of the game that will actually be played in the sessions. This can be complicated, given the technical limitations around choosing, or preparing for, specific video game scenes.

At the same time, the technical nature of video games is what makes them so interesting to work with. They can provide unique agentic opportunities to participants, and they are *fun*. Though it can take a lot of trial and error to figure out a facilitation style that appropriately balances this fun with the right level of *focus*, working with video games in a Freirean culture circle can ultimately be a rich, rewarding experience for both facilitator and participants.

Significance

This research is significant because few, if any, studies have been conducted on the use of video games in Freirean pedagogy with adult learners in a non-formal setting. My findings are aimed at critical educators interested in video games as well as video game educators interested

in critical theory. Although I can't say which video games will work best for everyone, my findings can help other researchers and educators narrow down existing options in consideration of their own contexts. In addition, my research contributes to the existing literature on Freirean decoding strategies in general, which can be useful to Freirean scholars who don't intend to work with games but are curious about working in novel, non-formal contexts with adults.

Limits and Opportunities for Future Research

The exploratory nature of Digital Decodings opens this subject of study to a range of new research opportunities. Changes in game selection, learner group, and educational methods could all be of value in future studies on the use of video games in Freirean culture circles.

Game Selection

In Digital Decodings, I selected seven popular single player role-playing games (RPGs) to decode during the sessions. However, I missed quite a few titles that are even *more* popular than those I chose. For example, we didn't play the iconic *Skyrim* (Bethesda, 2011), which continues to break sales records over a decade after its release (Saksena, 2023), for the simple reason that I hadn't yet played it when I started Digital Decodings. Nor did we play the highly anticipated *Baldur's Gate 3* (Larian, 2023), which was at the height of its profound "cultural and social impact" (Yuhas, 2023) when our sessions began, because I *also* hadn't yet played it.

Indeed, keeping up with "what's popular" when working with popular media is a challenge in its own right, one echoed by Egan-Simon (2020) in his work with short animated films. During our sessions, participants frequently discussed games that I'd never played, which often complicated my ability to parse relevant codifications. Because I'm generally a "patient gamer" (Eakin, 2024), or someone who prefers buying and playing video games once the hype

around their release has calmed down and they start to go on sale, I tend to play fewer games each year than most people I know who also play games. It would be interesting to see how something like Digital Decodings might go with a facilitator who has played more games overall and is more deeply immersed in the cultural movements surrounding the most popular titles.

Another limitation of my game selection was that all the games I chose had gameplay mechanics centered around *combat*. Given how generative comparing games was for participants, it would be interesting to also include games that *aren't* combat-oriented, such as *Planescape: Torment* (Black Isle Studios, 1999), in which combat is largely optional, or *Disco Elysium* (ZA/UM, 2019), which has no combat at all. Again, I did not include these games because I have not yet played them. However, the opportunity to contrast the lack of combat in one game with the presence of combat in another could be an interesting codification in its own right.

There are also opportunities for research with different video game genres. Although the first-person shooter (FPS) genre is a popular one, real-time strategy (RTS) games may be more generative. Though both genres are maximally effective codifications of a dominant ideology — *violence* for FPS games and *speed* for RTS games — "virtual speed translates more straightforwardly to real-world speed than virtual violence does to real-world violence" (Waddington, 2020, p. 57). I would be curious to know if future learners would decode RTS games similarly, or generate their own, unique thematic meanings from this genre.

Learner Group

There is also value in studying Freirean gaming circles with different learner groups. Participants in Digital Decodings were mostly people I already knew, they were all familiar with critical theory to a certain extent and were also all sexual or gender minorities (SGM). Having

shared SGM and political identities in the group created a felt sense of safety which made it easier for participants to share. Participants also highlighted some of the unexpected benefits of doing Freirean education with a "leftist" group, which included more expansive ways of thinking praxis than they might have initially anticipated. That said, my project garnered interest from a range of people during recruitment. Centering Freirean education around video games may provide opportunities to reach different learner groups, including those who are less familiar with, or perhaps even feel alienated by, critical thinking, which merits further research.

Educational Methods

My pedagogical methods relied almost exclusively on in-group facilitation with a brief ad-hoc lecture about Freire's life and resulting pedagogy. However, there are other educational methods in the literature used in popular media analysis that could be interesting to bring into a Freirean gaming circle. For example, Charlebois (2008) had students search for information about the film they were going to view *before* viewing it. Learning more about the production of a media text, for example, could reveal additional codifications that can be contrasted with symbols from the text itself. Although Charlebois worked with a film that was *unfamiliar* to his learner group, I still think this practice could be of value with popular video games.

For Boudreau, (2022) the toxic behaviours and expectations in the game industry often make their way into the narrative, visual, and procedure elements of the actual games produced. For example, some game developers require "crunch hours", or mandatory overtime to meet production deadlines. This is a common practice in the industry (Jiang, 2022) that has been known to have severe health consequences for workers (Arnold, 2023). It could be interesting to study how having learners read up on these practices, especially as they pertain to specific game titles, might impact their decoding experiences with said games.

A Personal Note

In order to keep the scope of this project under relative control, I focussed mostly on participants' learning outcomes in this thesis. However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this project was an educational experience for *everyone* involved. Indeed, Digital Decodings took me on my own learning journey.

When I finished my undergraduate studies, I swore to myself that I would *never* pursue a Master's degree. I'd never even heard of the term "first generation student" at the time: I just knew that I'd found my Bachelor's program unduly difficult and that I never wanted to subject myself to such a thing again. During the confinement orders of the COVID pandemic, however, I, like so many others, grew restless and needed a change. I ended up applying to a graduate diploma in Adult Education under the auspice that it *wasn't* a Master's program.

Yet, here I am, writing these final words.

Looking back at my thoughts and behaviours throughout Digital Decodings, I showed patterns of frustration, guilt, and self-criticism that continued to play out long after the project's final session. Freire (2014) has written at length about his own suffering and resulting process of transformation in times of change. I turned to these writings often in my hardest moments, which were most frequent in the actual writing of this thesis. I continued to journal extensively. I spoke with my family, my friends, my classmates, and my colleagues. Somehow, in it all, I found the courage to continue. Like Freire (2014), I was "educating my hope" (p. 24).

Conscientization does not happen overnight. It is a long journey that shifts, settles and picks back up again in sometimes strange and mysterious ways. I'm still not sure where I'll go from here. This project wasn't in my life's plans, after all. Then again, I don't think I've ever actually known what was. For so long, I've been "divided between an identical past and present,

and a future without hope" (Freire, 2000, p. 173). I only believed that the future could reproduce the harms of the past. I now know that is false.

Taking the decision to pursue an M.A., designing, developing, and running Digital Decodings, writing a thesis at the end of it all— has changed me. I live with less fear than I used to. I feel braver, more capable, and in so many ways, more *human*. I cannot attribute all these changes to Digital Decodings, of course. However, had I done anything else, I would not have learnt that which I now know. I would not have become who I am, *now.*

Someone who hopes, dreams, and *loves.*

> Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause — the cause of liberation. (Freire, 2000, p. 89)

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Appendix 1

Mass Effect 2 — Legendary Edition
(2010/2021, BioWare, Canada)
Sci-fi first person-shooter role playing game.
ESRB Rating – Mature 17+

In Mass Effect 2, the player controls Commander Shepard, a human who is tasked with saving the universe from catastrophic alien warfare. Commander Shepard's gender, appearance, skills and background are player customizable. In their quest to restore universal peace, Commander Shepard engages in dialogue, combat, and even romance with other humans as well as the various alien species in the game. The player can only engage in combat with enemy characters.

The Outer Worlds
(2019, Obsidian, United States of America)
Sci-fi first person-shooter role playing game.
ESRB Rating – Mature 17+

In the Outer Worlds, the player controls the Stranger, a human space colonist who holds the key to a galactical ethical conundrum. The Stranger's gender, appearance, skills and background are player customizable. As the Stranger navigates the galaxy to piece together what went so terribly wrong, they engage in dialogue and combat with other humans as well as the various alien species in the game. There are no opportunities for romance, but the Stranger may form close bonds with their shipmates. The player may engage in combat with any character in the game, although this is often detrimental to player progress.

Dragon Age: Inquisition
(2014, BioWare, Canada)
Third-person fantasy action role-playing game.
ESRB Rating – Mature 17+

In Dragon Age: Inquisition, the player controls the Inquisitor, a humanoid tasked with closing an interplanar rift in the sky that unleashes demons unto the world. The Inquisitor's fantasy race, gender, appearance, skills and background are player customizable. In their quest to settle civil unrest, the Inquisitor engages in dialogue, combat, and even romance with other

humanoids in the game. Combat also occurs with demons, monsters, and other rogue animals. The player may only engage in combat with enemy characters.

Horizon Zero Dawn
(2017, Guerilla Games, Netherlands)
Post-apocalyptic third-person action role-playing game.
ESRB Rating – Teen

In Horizon Zero Dawn, the player controls Aloy, a female human warrior on a quest to make sense of her lost lineage. Only Aloy's skills are player customizable. As Aloy traverses her world to explore clues of her hidden past, she engages in dialogue and combat with other humans as well as combat robots. There are no opportunities for romance and Aloy forms few friendships throughout the game. The player can only engage in combat with enemy characters.

The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt
(2015, CD Projekt Red, Poland)
Third-person fantasy hack and slash role-playing game.
ESRB Rating – Mature 17+

In the Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, the player controls Geralt, a male human monster slayer on a quest to find his adopted daughter. Only Geralt's skills are player customizable. As he searches for his child, Geralt engages in dialogue, combat, and even romance with other humanoids. Combat also occurs with demons, monsters, and other rogue animals. The player can only engage in combat with enemy characters.

Divinity: Original Sin 2
(2017, Larian, Belgium)
Isometric turn-based fantasy role-playing game.
ESRB Rating – Mature 17+

In Divinity: Original Sin 2, the player controls a Sourcerer, who is either one of six pre-made characters with set fantasy races, genders appearances, and backgrounds, or a character that is fully customized by the player. In both cases, the player also chooses the character's skills. As the Sourcerer grapples with the knowledge that they have the ability to become the next Divine, they engage in dialogue, combat, and even romance with other humanoids in the game. Combat also occurs with demons, monsters, and other rogue animals. The player may engage in combat with any character in the game, and this may significantly alter the game's

resolution.

Dragon's Dogma: Dark Arisen
(2012/2017, Capcom, Japan)
Third-person fantasy action role-playing game.
ESRB Rating – Mature 17+

In Dragon's Dogma, the player controls the Arisen, a human hero who must fight the Dragon that threatens the apocalypse. The Arisen's gender, appearance and skills are player customizable. The Arisen engages in minimal dialogue in their quest to challenge the Dragon – the game sets itself apart from other RPGs in its focus on combat. The only player companions are human-like entities called "Pawns" that simply fight alongside the Arisen when called. The player can usually only engage in combat with enemy characters, but at times non-adversarial characters may be targeted.

Appendix 2

Participant Recruitment Text and Poster

Hello Discord people! I am recruiting for my MA thesis project 😎
Read on to learn more and see how to apply if you're interested in participating!

—

Do you play a lot of RPGs? Do you like talking about the RPGs you play with other people? If so, you might be interested in joining my discussion-based RPG gaming circle!

I am an MA student in Educational Studies at Concordia University. I am studying the use of popular video games in discussion-based learning. As part of my study, I am looking at people's learning experiences playing and critically reflecting on commercial RPGs in a facilitated gaming circle.

We will be meeting once a week, in-person, for a period of 6-8 weeks in early 2024. Food and drink will be provided!

All participation is entirely confidential — your name will never be revealed.

For more information, and to sign up for an initial screening questionnaire, please fill out the form at this link: [redacted].

Thanks!

Appendix 3

Screening Form

Thank you for your interest in my study on the use of popular video games, notably RPGs, in discussion-based learning. If you're interested in joining my RPG gaming circle, please fill out this form.

Section 1: First things first…

None of the information you fill in here will be used in my research — it is for screening purposes only.

Q. 1) Do you play video games? * Answer required

A. 1) Yes → continues form.

A. 2) No → skips to Section 5 (not eligible).

Q. 2) Do you play RPGs? * Answer required

For the purpose of this study, RPGs include single-player video games with role-playing elements (e.g., character creation, stat and skill building, questing, etc.).

A. 1) Yes → continues form.

A. 2) No → skips to Section 5 (not eligible).

Q. 3) Are you older than 18 years of age? * Answer required

A. 1) Yes → continues form.

A. 2) No → skips to Section 5 (not eligible).

Section 2. This study involves recurring weekly participation over an extended period.

Q. 4) Are you willing and able to set aside a few hours each week, for 6-8 weeks, to participate in the study? * Answer required

A. 1) Yes → continues form.

A. 2) No → skips to Section 5 (not eligible).

Section 3. Getting in touch.

This information is confidential — I will not share it with anyone.

Q. 5) May I contact you to further discuss your participation in this research? * Answer required

A. 1) Yes → continues form.

A. 2) No → skips to Section 5 (not eligible).

Q. 6) What is your name?
A. [Enter your answer] → continues form.

Q. 7) What are your pronouns?
A. [Enter your answer] → continues form.

Q. 8) How do you want me to contact you?
I can send you an e-mail, a DM in Discord, or a message in WhatsApp or Signal.
A. 1) Email → skips to Q. 9).
A. 2) Discord DM → skips to Q. 10).
A. 3) WhatsApp → skips to Q. 11).
A. 4) Signal → skips to Q. 11).

Q. 9) What is your email?
A. [Enter your answer] → Continues to section 4.

Q. 10) What is your Discord username?
I may need to send a friend request to DM - my username is [redacted].
A. [Enter your answer] → Continues to section 4.

Q. 11) What is your phone number?
A. [Enter your answer] → Continues to section 4.

Section 4. Some final questions…
Like before, this stays between you and me. I am not using your answers here for my actual research — these questions are for screening purposes, only.

Q. 12) What makes you want to join my study?
A. [Enter your answer] → continues form.

Q. 13) Can you tell me a bit about any prior experience you have with discussion or learning circles?
B. [Enter your answer] → continues form.

Q. 14) What do you imagine an RPG gaming circle might look like?
C. [Enter your answer] → skips to Section 6.

Section 5. You are not eligible for this study.
This section is only visible to participants who answered "no" to any question from Q.1) through Q. 5).

Thank you for your time.

None of the information you've filled in here will be used for research purposes.

All submitted forms will be deleted at the end of the recruitment period, on or before February 28, 2024.

[Back] or [Submit]

Section 6. Thanks!
This section is only visible to participants who answered “yes” to Q.1) – Q.5).

I may contact you to discuss my study with you further.

None of the information you've filled in here will be used for research purposes. All submitted forms will be deleted at the end of the recruitment period, on or before January 31st 2024.

Please press "submit" to complete the form.

[Back] or [Submit]

Form Submission
Your response was submitted.

Appendix 4

Semi-structured Focus Group Guide

1. How did you find participating in the discussion circle overall?
2. Tell me something you learnt from the discussions during our sessions.
3. How did the different games impact the discussions we had?
4. What else impacted your experience of the discussion circle?
5. If you could have done anything differently, what would you have changed?
6. What are you taking away from this experience?

Appendix 5

Debriefing Statement

Digital Decodings: Learning from Discussion-Based Gaming Circles

Many thanks for participating in my study on the use of popular video games, notably RPGs, in discussion-based learning. Your experience provides valuable information on the benefits and challenges associated with running a discussion-based RPG gaming circle.

Discussion-based learning is a way to help people think critically about different social issues. Some research suggests that discussion circles focusing on popular media such as movies or music can be especially engaging. Your participation in my study adds a new and unique context - discussion-based RPG gaming circles - to this body of research. With the number of people who play video games rising every year, it's important to know whether facilitated gaming circles can also encourage discussion-based learning.

Your participation played a key role in the data-gathering phase of my research. If you are interested, I can keep you updated on my data analysis and send you my preliminary findings once they are ready. Your feedback would be welcome but is in no way mandatory.

I expect to submit my thesis to the examination committee by [redacted]. You may withdraw from the study at any time before this date without repercussion. If you do, I will exclude all data that relates to your participation from my analysis. If the withdrawal deadline changes, I will let you know.

If you have any questions or concerns in the meanwhile, please don't hesitate to contact me on the platform of your choosing:

E-mail – [redacted]
Discord - [redacted]
WhatsApp/Signal - [redacted]