



LESSON

More Than Just a Game

OVERVIEW

In this lesson, students delve into common perceptions of video games and then explore how such games might have more substantive uses and impact beyond the traditional uses of gaming for enjoyment and competition.

The video clips provided in this lesson are from *Thank You for Playing*, a thought-provoking portrait of one family's determination to respond to an impending tragedy through artistic expression. When Ryan Green, a video game programmer, learns that his young son Joel has cancer, he and his wife, Amy, begin documenting their emotional and faith-based journey with a poetic video game. *Thank You for Playing* follows Ryan and his family over two years creating "That Dragon, Cancer," which evolves from a cathartic exercise into a critically acclaimed work of art that sets the gaming industry abuzz. *A co-production of American Documentary | POV and ITVS. Official Selection of the 2015 Tribeca Film Festival.*

The film challenges the stereotypical view of video games as superficial or violent, revealing a new movement within the gaming world to create projects that document profound human experiences.

POV offers a lending library of DVDs that you can borrow anytime during the school year—FOR FREE! Get started by joining our [Community Network](#).

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify the draw and impact of video games
- Determine whether gaming has value to gamers beyond pleasure and competition
- Name socio-emotional, educational and non-cognitive uses of video games
- Create a design concept for a video game or other medium that invites users to experience/interact with a complex situation

GRADE LEVELS: 7-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Language Arts Technology

MATERIALS

Film clips from *Thank You for Playing* and equipment on which to show them.

Optional: "That Dragon, Cancer," the video game featured in the film. Available to purchase for PC, Mac, iPad and iPhone at <http://www.thatdragoncancer.com/purchase/>.

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period, plus homework

FILM CLIPS

Film clips provided in this lesson are from *Thank You for Playing*.

Clip 1: “To Live Like He’s Living” (5:35 min.)

The clip starts at 6:13 with a CT scan and a title card that reads: “At age one, Joel was given four months to live.” It ends at 11:48 with Ryan saying, “It wasn’t until the last four years that I had anything real to say.”

Clip 2: “I Was Having Fun” (2:27 min.)

The clip starts at 14:58 with Amy saying, “What we have is the father begins to tell the story of the brave knight Joel.” It ends at 17:25 with Ryan saying, “I think so.”

Clip 3: “Death and Gaming: Do They Go Together?” (5:19 min.)

The clip starts at 31:28 with the game designer saying: “My role, a lot of times, is to build the game.” It ends at 36:47, after Amy says, “People are harsh.”

Clip 4: “Playing the Game” (6:12 min.)

The clip starts at 42:16 at a gaming convention with a game presenter saying, “As far as these instances go...” The clip ends at 48:28 with Ryan saying, “It reminds me just how heavy it is.”

ACTIVITY

1. Engage students in a “popcorn” brainstorming session (students speak out to share their answers as they come to them), asking for responses to these questions: *What comes to mind when you think about video games? What are some of the video games you play? What are they about?* Record students’ thoughts on chart paper, Smart Board or other medium.
2. Ask students to reflect on the different responses in order to come to conclusions about perceptions of video games. You might focus students on specific categories that emerge from the collection (topics such as types of games played, how they make people feel, how these games affect their players, why people play them and so on). Generate a list of the five most common conclusions.
3. Ask each student to pair up with a classmate. Probe with the class whether video games can be used for something more than enjoyment or competition. Discussion prompts might include whether games can explore a current event or teach a skill. Pairs then spend a few minutes listing possible uses for video games.
4. Invite one pair to share three ideas; repeat this with the remaining pairs, asking them to share ideas that have not yet been offered. Have the class briefly discuss the various choices to decide which seem the most probable in a video gaming context.
5. Invite students to consider whether a game centered on something that is not typically the basis for a game is playable. Who would want to play a game of that nature?
6. Tell students they are about to watch segments of a documentary about a video game of this very nature. Don’t share the title yet. Let students know that the documentary follows parents Ryan and Amy Green, whose young son Joel was diagnosed with cancer.

Instruct students to jot down some of their initial thoughts about the clips as they watch them. Show **Clips 1–4**. (It might be helpful to show and briefly discuss each clip one at a time.)

7. Gauge students' emotional responses to the clips, allowing them to share how the segments made them feel. (Some students might be sad, or highly moved. Make sure they feel safe expressing these emotions.) Share the name of the film. Discuss with students aspects of the clips, posing some or all of the following questions as discussion prompts:

- What is your thought about cancer as the topic of a video game? How does it jibe with the reasons people get into gaming? Does it fit into any of the categories you shared at the beginning of the lesson?
- How do Ryan and Amy use the creation of the game to negotiate Joel's illness? What would you do to negotiate a tough situation? Would you do something similar to what Ryan and Amy do? Explain.
- What other "tools" do Ryan and Amy use to cope with their son's illness and approaching death? Are these better methods than the creation of a video game? Discuss.
- Do you think a game designer would be able to create a game about a very personal issue in the way that Ryan does? Discuss. Could you do something similar, using any medium (such as writing a story, drawing a picture or taking a photo)? Explain.
- What are the different ways people interact with artistic mediums, and how does the way a person interacts with a medium affect how they experience the message the artist is trying to convey? For example, in a film you watch/observe a linear narrative; in a book you imagine what the writer is describing; with a sculpture, you might touch its surface to feel its texture. In a video game the player often has a number of options for how they choose to interact with the narrative. For example, the player can dictate the pace of the scene, what happens next, how they explore the space and so on.
- Is a video game a useful tool for educating gamers about important topics? If yes, how does a game on such issues need to be designed in order to get users interested in playing it?
- What does this documentary say about the use and impact of video games? How might people view the gaming industry if similar types of products were produced in greater numbers?

Homework: Have students come up with design concepts for video games or other media that invite users to experience/interact with complex situations and present their ideas as pitches that would excite potential gamers about playing the video game. If time allows, students can pitch their concepts to their classmates and/or create their games using free and simple video game creation tools such as Scratch (see **Resources** below) and present them to the class.

EXTENSIONS/ADAPTATIONS

1. Coping with the Hard Stuff

People negotiate and cope with complex circumstances in different ways. Students can work in small groups to identify, briefly research and present on what influences an individual's coping mechanisms (i.e., religion, spirituality, family, creativity). Create a large spider web and have groups record their findings on it. Then have the class discuss how various coping strategies can be used to negotiate life's challenges.

2. Documenting Life

Thank You for Playing presents two powerful storytelling tools: the documentary itself and the video game (an innovative approach). Everyone has a story to tell. Ask students to reflect on and write about moments in their lives that they would be comfortable sharing. Invite them to tell their stories through the mediums of their choice. Challenge students to think outside the box and try mediums they wouldn't normally use or associate with their topics (i.e., a game, a script, a flip book). If time allows, use this as an opportunity to discuss how stories and mediums of expression are related. When and why might a certain medium be appropriate or inappropriate for a story?

Have students share their stories in a gallery-type presentation, with student projects placed around the room for peers to review and experience. The class discusses how these various projects expand the definition of storytelling and how they give stories more depth, meaning, feeling and so on.

3. The Evolution of Gaming

Students can research how video games have evolved over time, taking a close look at those games that focus more on socio-emotional development, teaching and learning, soft-skills development. They might consider creating a digital interactive timeline or a print timeline and using it to predict what games will be like in the future. Specifically, will they be designed to be more practical and integral to human development and behavior?

RESOURCES

POV Resources

POV: ***Thank You For Playing***

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/thankyouforplaying> - The POV site has additional features, including an interview with the filmmakers and a general discussion guide with additional information, resources and activity ideas.

POV: Media Literacy Questions for Analyzing POV Films

<http://www.pbs.org/pov/educators/media-literacy.php> - This list of questions provides a useful starting point for leading rich discussions that challenge students to think critically about documentaries.

Film-Related Web-Sites

Thank You For Playing

www.thankyouforplayingfilm.com/ - Information about the film and filmmakers.

Film Platform

<http://filmplatform.net/product/thank-you-for-playing/> - Purchase the film for your school, organization, hospital or community.

About "That Dragon, Cancer"

"That Dragon, Cancer" Website

<http://www.thatdragoncancer.com> - In addition to information about the game and its creative team, the website includes Ryan's blog and information about Joel's cancer and treatment.

Articles and Reviews

- *The Guardian*: “That Dragon, Cancer and the Weird Complexities of Grief”
<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2016/jan/14/that-dragon-cancer-and-the-weird-complexities-of-grief>
- Metacritic: “That Dragon, Cancer”
<http://www.metacritic.com/game/pc/that-dragon-cancer>
- *The New York Times*: “Games You Can’t Win”
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/17/opinion/games-you-cant-win.html?_r=0
- *The New York Times*: “This Video Game Will Break Your Heart”
<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/06/arts/that-dragon-cancer-video-game-will-break-your-heart.html>
- *Polygon*: “A Game about Cancer, One Year Later”
<http://www.polygon.com/features/2015/4/16/8374481/that-dragon-cancer>
- *Wired*: “Playing for Time”
<https://www.wired.com/2016/01/that-dragon-cancer/>

Gaming

(socio-emotional, educational and health elements of video games)

Games for Change

<http://www.gamesforchange.org/> - Founded in 2004, Games for Change facilitates the creation and distribution of social impact games that serve as critical tools in humanitarian and educational efforts. “That Dragon, Cancer” won the group’s award for most innovative game in 2016.

Scratch

<https://scratch.mit.edu/educators/> – Created by the MIT Media Lab, this is a free-to-use platform that enables students to program their own interactive stories, games and animations.

Articles About Gaming

- American Psychological Association: “Video Games Play May Provide Learning, Health, Social Benefits, Review Finds”
<http://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/2013/11/video-games.aspx>
- CNN Money: “How a Video Game Can Help People Grieve”
<http://money.cnn.com/2016/06/16/technology/that-dragon-cancer-ryan-green/>
- *Frontiers in Psychology*: “Gaming Well: Links between Videogames and Flourishing Mental Health” <http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00260/full>
- KQED News, *Mind/Shift*: “Social And Emotional Benefits of Video Games: Metacognition and Relationships” <https://www.kqed.org/mindshift/2014/05/16/social-and-emotional-benefits-of-video-games-metacognition-and-relationships/>

- LearningWorks for Kids: “Can Video Games Improve Social and Emotional Learning Skills?” <http://learningworksforkids.com/2016/01/can-video-games-improve-social-and-emotional-learning-skills/>
- *The New York Times*: “On a Hunt for What Makes Gamers Keep Gaming” <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/07/science/07tierney.html>
- Pew Research Center: “Gaming and Gamers” <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/12/15/gaming-and-gamers/>
- *Psychology Today*: “Video Games, Problem-Solving and Self-Efficacy Part 1” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201208/video-games-problem-solving-and-self-efficacy-part-1>
- *Psychology Today*: “Video Games, Problem-Solving and Self-Efficacy - Part 2” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/positively-media/201208/video-games-problem-solving-and-self-efficacy-part-2>
- *U.S. News & World Report*: “Gaming the System” <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/05/29/can-video-games-solve-public-health-problems>

STANDARDS

Common Core State English Language Arts Standards

(<http://www.corestandards.org/read-the-standards/>)

[SL.7.2](#) Analyze the main ideas and supporting details presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and explain how the ideas clarify a topic, text or issue under study.

[SL.8.2](#) Analyze the purpose of information presented in diverse media and formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) and evaluate the motives (e.g., social, commercial, political) behind its presentation.

[SL.9-10.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse media or formats (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source.

[SL.11-12.2](#) Integrate multiple sources of information presented in diverse formats and media (e.g., visually, quantitatively, orally) in order to make informed decisions and solve problems, evaluating the credibility and accuracy of each source and noting any discrepancies among the data.

ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education) Standards

(https://www.iste.org/docs/pdfs/20-14_ISTE_Standards-S_PDF.pdf)

1. Creativity and Innovation

Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge and develop innovative products and processes using technology.

4. Critical thinking, problem solving and decision-making

Students use critical thinking skills to plan and conduct research, manage projects, solve problems and make informed decisions using appropriate digital tools and resources.

National Core Arts Standards for Media Arts

(<http://www.mediaartseducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Media-Arts-Standards-6-4-14.pdf>)

Anchor Standard: Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

- 7th grade (MA:Cr1.1.7) Produce a variety of ideas and solutions for media artworks through application of chosen inventive processes, such as concept modeling and prototyping.
- 8th grade (MA:Cr1.1.8) Generate ideas, goals and solutions for original media artworks through application of focused creative processes, such as divergent thinking and experimenting.
- HS Proficient (MA:Cr1.1.I) Use identified generative methods to formulate multiple ideas, develop artistic goals and problem solve in media arts creation processes.
- HS Accomplished (MA:Cr1.1.II) Strategically utilize generative methods to formulate multiple ideas, refine artistic goals and increase the originality of approaches in media arts creation processes.
- HS Advanced (MA:Cr1.1.III) Integrate aesthetic principles with a variety of generative methods to fluently form original ideas, solutions and innovations in media arts creation processes.

Anchor Standard: Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

- 7th grade: (MA:Cr2.1.7) Design, propose and evaluate artistic ideas, plans, prototypes, and production processes for media arts productions, considering expressive intent and resources.
- 8th grade (MA:Cr2.1.8) Structure and critique ideas, plans, prototypes and production processes for media arts productions, considering intent, resources and the presentation context.
- HS Proficient (MA:Cr2.1.I) Apply aesthetic criteria in developing, proposing and refining artistic ideas, plans, prototypes and production processes for media arts productions, considering original inspirations, goals and presentation context.
- HS Accomplished (MA:Cr2.1.II) Apply a personal aesthetic in designing, testing and refining original artistic ideas, prototypes and production strategies for media arts productions, considering artistic intentions, constraints of resources and presentation context.
- HS Advanced (MA:Cr2.1.III) Integrate a sophisticated personal aesthetic and knowledge of systems processes in forming, testing and proposing original artistic ideas, prototypes and production frameworks, considering complex constraints of goals, time, resources and personal limitations.

Anchor Standard: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

- 7th grade (MA:Re7.1.7) b. Describe, compare and analyze how various forms, methods and styles in media artworks interact with personal preferences in influencing audience experience.

- 8th grade (MA:Re7.1.8) b. Compare, contrast and analyze how various forms, methods and styles in media artworks manage audience experience and create intention.
- HS Proficient (MA:Re7.1.I) b. Analyze how a variety of media artworks manage audience experience and create intention through multimodal perception.
- HS Accomplished (MA:Re7.1.II) a. Analyze and synthesize the qualities and relationships of the components in a variety of media artworks, and feedback on how they impact audience. b. Analyze how a broad range of media artworks manage audience experience, create intention and persuasion through multimodal perception.
- HS Advanced (MA:Re7.1.III) a. Analyze and synthesize the qualities and relationships of the components and audience impact in a variety of media artworks. b. Survey an exemplary range of media artworks, analyzing methods for managing audience experience, creating intention and persuasion through multimodal perception, and systemic communications.

Anchor Standard: Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

- 7th (MA:Cn10.1.7) b. Explain and show how media artworks form new meanings and knowledge, situations and cultural experiences, such as learning, and new information.
- 8th (MA:Cn10.1.8) b. Explain and demonstrate how media artworks expand meaning and knowledge, and create cultural experiences, such as local and global events.
- HS Proficient (MA:Cn10.1.I) a. Access, evaluate and integrate personal and external resources to inform the creation of original media artworks, such as experiences, interests and cultural experiences. b. Explain and demonstrate the use of media artworks to expand meaning and knowledge, and create cultural experiences, such as learning and sharing through online environments.
- HS Accomplished (MA:Cn10.1.II) b. Explain and demonstrate the use of media artworks to synthesize new meaning and knowledge, and reflect and form cultural experiences, such as new connections between themes and ideas, local and global networks, and personal influence.
- HS Advanced (MA:Cn10.1.III) a. Independently and proactively access relevant and qualitative resources to inform the creation of cogent media artworks. b. Demonstrate and expound on the use of media artworks to consummate new meaning, knowledge and impactful cultural experiences.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Israel owns Educational Writing & Consulting (www.micheleisrael.com), where she works with large and small educational, nonprofit and media organizations to bolster products and programs. Her rich career spans more than 25 years of successful experience developing educational materials and resources, designing and facilitating training, generating communication materials and grant proposals and assisting in organizational and program development. Her long list of clients includes Tiffany & Co., Frost Valley YMCA, Teaching Tolerance, the Public Broadcasting Service, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene, WETA Public Television, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, Harm Reduction Coalition and IEEE.