

Using Video Games to Jumpstart Student-Centered Research and Inquiry in the General Education Humanities Classroom

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Abstract

This article discusses preliminary results of a study of the author's use of gaming to facilitate research-based writing assignments in her classes, focusing specifically on a 200-level general education introductory literature course, *The Medieval World*, taught in Spring 2023 at Lindenwood University in Missouri, U.S.A. The purpose of the study was to determine whether approaching topic selection for the research-based writing assignment in a general education literature course through gaming could result in more student buy-in and thus, greater student retention, better student work, and a more successful learning experience and outcome for such an assignment than does a traditional academic approach to this work. The preliminary findings show that this approach did lead to more and higher quality engagement and a generally positive experience with the research-based written assignment for this class, as reported by students via survey and reflection and verified by the professor's observations of the quantity and quality of those students' work.

Keywords: General Education, Game-Based Learning, Gamification, Video Games, Role-Playing Games (RPG), Collaborative Learning Communities

Introduction

Post-pandemic, college admissions stabilizing at a downward trend (NCES, 2023; Berg, Lee, Randolph, Ryu, & Shapiro, 2023), general public and student-specific ambivalence regarding the value of a college degree (Lederman, 2023; Marken and Hrynowski, 2023; Nemecek, 2023; van Kooten, 2023) and, within a degree program, a generally ambivalent-to-negative student perception of the value of general education coursework, noted in student opinion pieces and scholarly studies (Hanstedt, 2020; Wetherington, K.C., 2021; Buercklin, 2022; Veara, 2023; Cope et al, 2023), together with rising awareness of the disproportionate issues students of color, first-generation and non-traditional students, Pell-eligible students, and most recently, male students, face regarding successful completion rates (Barshay, 2023; Startz, 2022; Whistle & Hiler, 2018; Reeves & Smith, 2021), have resulted in institutional concerns regarding student retention and satisfaction. In response, administrations, faculty and staff are engaging in increased efforts to attract and retain students, including measures such as rebranding the university, redesigning curriculum and degree programs, and revising institutional learning outcomes, all in the name of improving students' satisfaction with their college experience.

The classroom experience is one essential means by which faculty can contribute to positive student learning experiences and promote student growth and development, personally and professionally, thereby supporting student satisfaction and retention efforts. Faculty who teach general education courses, in particular, have the twinned opportunity and responsibility to reach students beyond their areas of specialization, and are tasked with engaging students from a wide

variety of backgrounds and preparations who are enrolled in their courses to complete distribution requirements and may or may not actually be interested in their subject area. Locating approaches that engage and retain interest in courses in one's specialization from students who are not majors in a given area of study is becoming more and more challenging, as students question the worth of such courses beyond their major and career goals. This is evidenced in the sampling of student opinion pieces in school papers noted above and in surveys that show students often view general education coursework as a checklist of requirements to complete and irrelevant to their needs and interests (Mintz, 2020).

There are, therefore, a number of challenges related to teaching general education; as a professor in Humanities (English and Gender Studies) here are five the author of this study most commonly sees in her own composition and literature general education courses, with representative student comments reflecting them:

1. The majority of students enrolled in the class are taking it solely for gen. ed. requirements and have little to no interest in the subject. ("I'm only taking this class for gen ed")
2. Students who are not English majors often feel insecure about their ability to do well, especially on written assignments. ("I'm not good at English")
3. General education courses include students from every level, first-year to senior, and include transfer and nontraditional students; thus, there is no reliable common ground in training. ("This isn't my major/ I've never taken a literature course before")
4. Students come into general education courses with a variety of educational backgrounds and preparation from other areas of study. ("I'm a xxx major, I don't know enough about this subject for you to expect me to research in it")
5. Many students, particularly at the second year and above, do not feel they should have to conduct coursework or research outside of their area of study. ("This is just a general education course, why do I have to do a research project?")

One or more of these challenges can be enough for a student either to drop the course, to stop attending the course, or to fail the course and/or its major assignments. They are exacerbated by both outside forces such as health, family circumstances and work-related issues, like those on which the pandemic shone a spotlight (Hu et al, 2022; Sanchez, 2022), and larger institutional concerns tied to student demographics, as noted above. DFWI rates tend to be relatively high in general education courses, which include required introductory courses such as Composition often identified as "gateway" courses and courses with larger enrollments, in comparison to major courses. Although the course on which this study is based is a literature course, rather than a composition one, it does require writing, and non English/ Humanities majors typically view any course requiring extensive reading and writing to be difficult. This, in turn, amplifies such students' perception that the course does not meet their needs or interests and thus, does not hold value for them, which reinforces their sense that the course is harder, making dropping the course or simply not completing it more possible than otherwise might be the case. Meeting students where they are and helping them to advance themselves personally and/or professionally and to find value in a course sometimes well beyond their comfort zone while navigating all of these challenges is difficult, and in today's academic environment in which the value of what is happening in the classroom is continuously interrogated, even more so. To do so while also meeting course objectives and institutional learning outcomes requires professors, particularly in

general education courses, to be increasingly thoughtful and innovative in course, assignment, and assessment design. The video game-based project in *The Medieval World* and this corresponding study of student experiences of it are a preliminary foray into such a deliberate and intentional approach.

Methods

The efforts toward addressing these concerns undertaken in the on-ground, traditional 16-week general education literature course *The Medieval World*, taught at Lindenwood University in Spring 2023, took into consideration several factors in addition to the five challenges noted above: 1. The professor's own ethos as a professor, which emphasizes student-centered pedagogical practices and culturally responsive assessment (Ridley Elmes, 2020); 2. The need for assignments that offer students training in research and writing skills and competencies with transfer value across disciplines, yet also hinder cheating and the use of Chat GPT and similar programs to complete complex writing assignments so students do, in fact, receive that training; and 3. The institution's newly adopted graduate learning attributes and teaching framework, RISE (Rigor, Inclusiveness, Support, and Engagement). To meet these various challenges and needs, the author determined she would make use of an assignment she had employed with success in other of her courses—the use of video games to jumpstart student selection of research topics—in support of the major research and writing assignment for this course. Having never formally studied the effectiveness of this approach, although the author knew it had been popular and successful with past students, she took this study as an opportunity to reframe the assignment specifically for the class under investigation, redesigned for a general education student population and aligning explicitly with the university's new graduate attributes and RISE teaching model. Redesigned, the scaffolded assignment included time in class to go over the assignment components and assessment guidelines two weeks prior to its start, an orientation with a reference librarian two weeks prior to its start, a week of gaming and reflection via a gaming log, selection of a research topic based on student reflections and professorial feedback one week after gaming, submission of an annotated bibliography three weeks after gaming, and submission of the completed project three weeks after the annotated bibliography was completed.

The author then undertook a study consisting of two formal surveys of student experience with general education research assignments and playing video games, conducted pre- and post-gaming via Qualtrics; of assessment of the quantity and quality of work they completed towards the project, measured via professorial observation; of assessment of the quality of the final product and how many students successfully completed the project, measured via professorial observation and grading criteria; and of evaluation of the students' perception of this research and writing project compared with others completed for general education courses, measured via survey and student reflections. The overall investigative goal for this study was first, to determine whether this approach is an effective alternative to more traditional means of identifying a topic for research (e.g. the professor assigning students a topic or giving them a list of subjects to select from), measured by student self-reported satisfaction with their research topic and outcomes; second, to determine whether the assignment aided in student retention and success in the class, measured by project completion and course DFW rate; third, to determine whether this approach measurably improved student perception of the research and writing assignment in the course, indicated via survey and student reflection; and fourth, whether the

project as designed could help students perceive greater value in taking this course in comparison to other general education courses, measured by survey.

Framework

As mentioned above, this assignment was framed within the graduate attributes and RISE pillars for Lindenwood, focusing on a general student population. The assignment was designed to be utilized by students of every level of undergraduate college preparedness and experience, from first-year students to seniors, and every demographic, from transfer, nontraditional, and international students to students of any gender, race, ethnicity, social class, and religious affiliation. Making use of Lindenwood’s graduate attributes and RISE pedagogical model as the framing of this assignment regarding institutional expectations for students in terms of degree outcomes and for professors in terms of pedagogical goals and approach ensured that it organically dovetailed with the university’s vision. This approach provided a check and balance on outcome rooted not merely in the professor’s own ideas of effective assignment design but in an institutionally developed and approved model. Figure 1 lists the graduate attributes and RISE goals, with those focused on in this course and project highlighted in yellow.

Lindenwood Graduate Attributes and RISE goals for this project (and this class)

Graduate Attributes	RISE
<p>Adaptable Problem Solvers</p> <p>Lifelong Learners</p> <p>Effective Communicators</p> <p>Analytical Thinkers</p> <p>Responsible Citizens</p> <p>Ethical Decision Makers</p> <p>Global Advocates</p>	<p>Rigor:</p> <p>Rigorous course design involves thoughtfully planning a learning experience that aligns with program and institutional expectations, the traditions and trends of the field, and proven methods for learning.</p> <p>Courses that are designed for rigor are those in which an instructor sets appropriately high expectations for student learning, engage students in deep learning of meaningful content, assesses learning at levels of cognitive complexity beyond recall and understanding, and challenges students to develop new habits of mind that transfer across concepts and contexts.</p> <p>Inclusiveness: At Lindenwood, we want our students to feel that they belong, that they are valued, and that their experiences matter. We want them to feel that their diversity of experience, ability, identity, and opinion are appreciated and won’t prove to be barriers to their learning.</p> <p>Support : Instructional support refers to course design, organization, guidance, interactions, or resources that aid student learning or success and/or enhance students’ self-efficacy.</p> <p>Engagement: Engagement refers to course design or instructional strategies designed to stimulate student interest, motivation, and involvement in learning.</p> <p>At Lindenwood, we want students to feel a sense of curiosity, excitement, and ownership in their learning experiences, and engaging teaching is an important way to motivate these things. We want our graduates to become lifelong learners</p>

Figure 1. Lindenwood University Graduate Attributes and RISE instructional goals

So framed, the pedagogical goal for this assignment was to:

1. Relocate Student’s Inherent Curiosity and Drive to Know More (RISE: Engagement)
2. In service of facilitating an original student-designed research project (RISE: Rigor)
3. Using students’ intrinsic interests and personal proclivities (RISE: Inclusiveness)
4. With the professor’s support via pedagogical choices (RISE: Support)

In addition to using RISE as a means of developing effective student-oriented teaching practices, faculty at Lindenwood select one or more graduate attributes to attach to each course taught. Student progress towards the graduate attribute(s) selected is assessed in each class via a “graduate attribute signature assignment” the professor develops expressly to measure the course’s effectiveness towards helping students to develop the selected attribute(s). For the students in The Medieval World, the primary graduate attribute formally being assessed was analytical thinker, with the professor’s own secondary interests for this study being to help them develop adaptable problem-solving, effective communication, and lifelong learning. This translated to the following assignment description:

General Education Category

Human Culture: Literature; Human Diversity

Graduate Attribute

Analytical Thinkers

Graduate Attribute Definition

Analytical Thinkers use data and evidence to form judgments about complex situations.

Graduate Attribute Signature Assignment and Description

Video Game jumpstarted research project. Students in this class will spend approximately 6 hours playing a video game of the student’s choice that is based loosely on the medieval period: for example, Skyrim, Assassin’s Creed: Valhalla, Medieval Dynasty, Lord of the Rings Online, or Kingdom Come: Deliverance.

Based on your game play, with the instructor’s guidance, you will develop a research project on some aspect of the Middle Ages of particular interest to you, conduct research using at least 6-8 credible peer-reviewed sources, and write an essay documenting your subject, including its relationship to the gaming world you examined.

Here is how the assignment meets RISE goals on the student’s side of things:

Rigor: 5 page research essay with 6-8 credible peer-reviewed sources.

Inclusiveness: Students select a game they want to play, and a research topic from their game play that is unique to their experiences and interests

Support: instructional guidance at each stage of the assignment

Engagement: students using media many of them already consume regularly as a gateway into the subject research

Participants

The participants in this study were the students enrolled in the Spring 2023 general education literature course, The Medieval World, taught by Dr. Melissa Ridley Elmes at Lindenwood University. Of the 23 students enrolled in the course, 18 agreed to participate in the surveys; only seventeen followed through with the full first survey beyond the initial demographics section. In the initial survey conducted prior to gaming students were asked to answer questions related to demographics, to provide a record of the representative sample with which the author was

working. Figure 2 records their responses, providing a snapshot of the class breakdown in terms of academic year, family educational history, age, gender, and ethnicity, all elements that have been documented to play a role in student experience and success in college and all elements that can affect a student's perception of general education coursework in comparison to major coursework. These demographics are relatively representative of this university's overall population regarding age and race/ethnicity; it was surprising to have such a large number of male students enrolled in the course, as usually the author's literature courses skew more female to male.

English 20105, World Literature: The Medieval World (GE HC-LIT, HD), Spring 2023

Opening Survey, demographics:

First-year students: 3	Family history of education:
Sophomore: 6	No college: 3
Junior: 6	Associate's degree: 1
Senior: 3	Bachelor's degree: 6
	Master's degree: 7
	PhD: 1
Age range:	
18-21: 13	
22-25: 5	
	Race/ethnicity
Gender identity:	Caucasian: 15
Prefer not to say: 1	Hispanic: 1
Female: 5	Black: 1
Male: 12	Asian: 1

Figure 2. Demographics of ENGL 20105, The Medieval World, Spring 2023

Because this was a general education course, student major is also a consideration to be taken into account. In this course, the students participating in the survey reported their majors as follows:

Biological Sciences 1
Business Administration 1
English 1
Entrepreneurial Studies 2
Environmental Science 2
Mass Communications/ Broadcasting 1
Political Science/ Pre Law 1
Undecided 9

With only one English major, this was a highly representative population for a literature general education course at Lindenwood University. That there were nine students reporting undecided as their major, of whom no more than three were first-year students per their self-reported academic year, is significant: these are students for whom this course could play an important

role in influencing their choice of major towards an English degree, if they find it compelling and valuable enough. Any of these students, with the exception of the one who has declared an English major, could also be a candidate for a minor or double major in English, again depending upon their experience of the course. Like many general education courses, this course therefore held significant potential for attracting students to the professor's area of study, as well as holding importance for student retention and engagement more generally.

Students then responded to eighteen questions about their prior experience with research assignments in general education humanities courses. Of the 18 participants, four reported they had never done research in a general education course, twelve reported they had done "some" research, one reported completing "a lot" and one responded n/a; their comfort levels with research (very, slightly, somewhat, not very) corresponded to their reported experience. At this point, the students participating in the survey dropped to seventeen. Nine reported they had limited experience coming up with their own research topics, and eight that they had often developed their own research topics. Eleven reported they were "fairly comfortable but I worry whether my topics are good" concerning coming up with their own topics, with one reporting they "prefer the professor offer a list of topics to choose from" and five finding it "challenging but rewarding" to develop their own topics. In terms of student reliance on professorial support for research projects, one reported they could not design and complete a project without full professorial supervision, two that they could complete a project of their own design but strongly preferred the professor guide it and offer feedback at every stage, eight that they can conduct independent research but prefer the professor offer multiple points of feedback, two that they can do an independently designed and executed project as long as there are fixed due dates and points of professorial feedback, and four that they strongly preferred the professor conduct the project in more hands-off fashion, to be consulted at the student's need. Concerning the intrinsic, personal value students found in conducting prior humanities research, five reported they had never done a humanities research project, five that they had not found it to be personally valuable or rewarding, six that they had found it somewhat valuable and rewarding, and only one that they had found it very valuable and rewarding. Concerning their comfort level with open-ended inquiry, two reported being "very uncomfortable," five were "somewhat uncomfortable," one was "neither comfortable nor uncomfortable," six were "somewhat comfortable," and three were "very comfortable." And finally, regarding their preferences for having the professor tell them what to think about course material versus thinking for themselves, one strongly preferred the professor tell them what to think, six somewhat preferred the professor tell them what to think, four did not have a preference one way or the other, five somewhat preferred to decide for themselves what to think, and one strongly preferred to decide for themselves what to think. In all, then, this course consisted primarily of students who were moderately comfortable to uncomfortable with open-ended inquiry and thinking for themselves regarding course subject matter and with coming up with their own research ideas, and of students with none to moderate prior experience with research in a humanities general education course.

The pre-gaming survey concluded with eleven questions about student experiences with playing video games prior to the course. To the question "how often do you play video games?" one responded "never," two responded "rarely," one responded "sometimes," five responded "often," one responded "a lot," and seven responded "regularly." Six had been playing video games "for more than fifteen years," and all but one had played video games for at least five years. Eleven reported as being "very comfortable," three as "fairly comfortable," two as "somewhat

comfortable” and one as “not at all comfortable” with playing video games. Fourteen of the students had never played a video game for a class, and fifteen of the seventeen completing the survey had never used a video game to conduct research. The students in this class therefore had a relatively strong gaming background across the board, indicated a high level of proficiency and interest in gaming as a group, and with few exceptions had never played a video game for class or used gaming for research purposes, indicating this project would provide them with a unique and potentially engaging academic experience.

Finally, figure 3 shows the breakdown of their self-reported focus while gaming. This information was important in determining how much direction the professor needed to give her students regarding what to pay attention to while they gamed for the class. Had these answers skewed mostly towards game mechanics, graphics, and winning, it would have hindered their attention to the game world, which is the primary focus of this assignment; fortunately, the distribution was fairly evenly spread across categories, with game world being in the top-three responses, indicating these students were intrinsically motivated to pay attention to the elements of gaming most important for the purposes of this project.

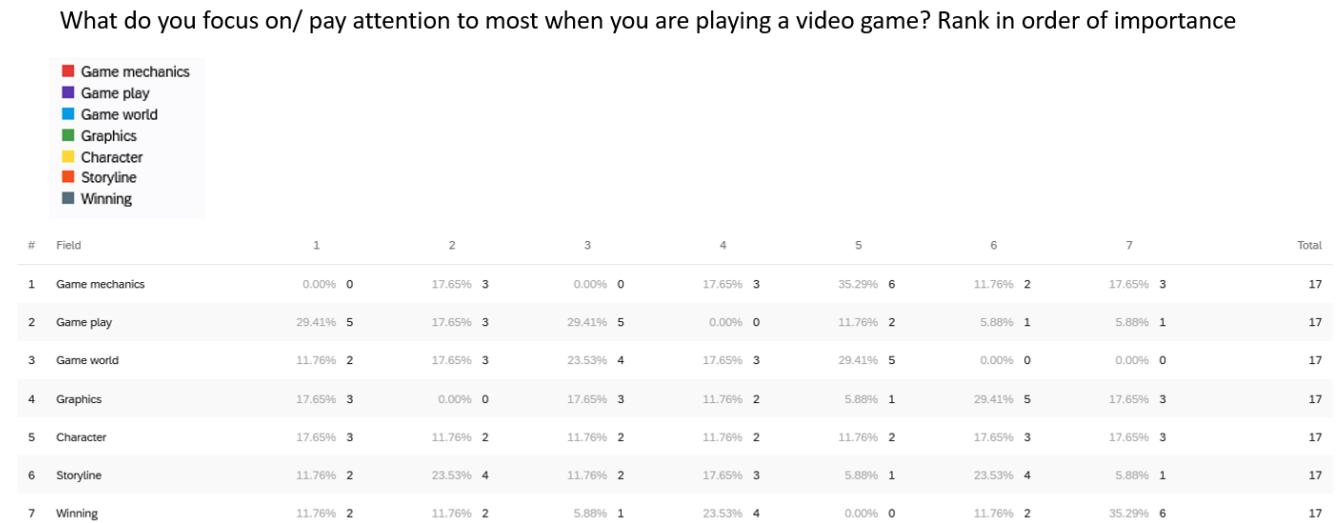


Figure 3. breakdown of self-reported student focus in gaming

On the first day of class, students were asked to respond to a series of questions about their expectations of and prior experiences with the course subject matter. Figure 4 shows the questions alongside representative responses from the 21 responses submitted. The responses not highlighted show answers that correspond to the observations regarding the challenges of teaching a general education course noted above, the single response bolded in red indicates a student who may struggle with this project, and those responses highlighted in yellow show answers that indicate those students will likely respond well to the course and/or project.

Student Goals for this Class (from first-day survey):

1. Why are you taking this course?
2. What is your familiarity with the course subject?
3. After reading the course objectives, what are you most looking forward to learning?
4. What are you dreading most about this course?
5. [What reading(s) are you looking forward to most?]
6. [What reading(s) are you looking forward to least?]
7. What skills and abilities do you hope you walk away with from this course?

Representative responses:

1. this class works out credit-wise for me; getting my credit done; I needed an english class to fulfill my graduation requirements; I am taking this course because I am fulfilling my gen ed requirements; it is the last general education course I have to take; **I am taking this course because it fits nicely with the degree I am trying to earn, that being history. I also have a deep love for the medieval world.**
2. Besides general history courses I have not covered anything medieval before in a class; I have almost no experience with medieval literature. There was a history class i took where we talked about medieval times; Some, not a lot; I am not familiar with this course subject at all; **nothing, except what's on tv like The Vikings and Game of Thrones**
3. I don't know; nothing really, I just hope the class is at least interesting; **I am really excited about learning about Medieval History and how it shaped many things today; how much of medieval texts actually shows up in video games I play like Skyrim**
4. The workload I guess; I'm not a big reader; The workload. I didn't expect it to be so much, but it looks like I'll be doing a lot of work; I am dreading just having to write; I am not looking forward to the readings; **the research project**
7. **The ability to really understand what a person living in "the medieval world" would feel like; The ability to learn from the past and to somehow use what I learn in the present time !**

Figure 4. First day questions and representative student answers

Overall, these students' responses indicate they are a strongly representative sample of the typical population of a general education literature/humanities course at Lindenwood University concerning previous experience with and interest in course subject matter and general sentiment regarding course objectives and requirements, and therefore are a good sample population for this study.

Process

The entire graduate attribute assignment, start to finish, spanned ten weeks of the course, from week six through week fifteen. The basic structure of the project was as follows:

1. Discussion of project and its components and orientation with a Research Specialist on using library databases to conduct research
2. Follow-up with the professor in class for questions and requests for clarification on either the assignment or the research process, and to discuss possible games beyond those listed on the syllabus, for students who have already played those games and do not want to revisit them or students not interested in those games. Discussion of gaming resources on campus, especially the Gaming Lab.
3. Pre-gaming survey
4. One week of game play with gaming log and reflection assignments (in lieu of holding formal class sessions, because this is many hours of work.)
5. Professor feedback on gaming logs, including possible research topics based on student game play
6. Students select their topics and conduct research

7. Students complete an annotated bibliography
8. Professor feedback on annotated bibliography/ quality of sources selected
9. Post-gaming survey
10. Students conduct follow-up research if needed; write up and submit report
11. Professor feedback on final written product

This process was so structured to allow students the freedom to develop and design their own research topic and question, while ensuring they had time to complete each step and received professorial feedback at each developmental stage of the project, especially regarding what games they could select—playing a video game that doesn't have a strong tie to medieval aesthetics, history, or folklore in some way would sabotage a student's project from the outset. Students were also encouraged to visit the professor during her office hours if they felt they needed more guidance and support.

Unlike a more traditional approach to a research assignment in which a professor either assigns students a topic or preselects a set of topics for students to choose from, this study emphasized original student-generated inquiry. The author also wanted to avoid simply asking the students to select one of the texts read in class to research something about, because with medieval literature it is far too easy for them to find ideas and even entire essays online already. Therefore, this project required them to research a subject related to the course; however, that, too, could be readily located and simply used from an online or print source. Since one of the goals was to help students learn to engage with and be comfortable with open-ended thinking leading to an original question or set of questions, rather than searching for an answer to a particular question or problem from the get-go, this assignment was expressly designed to require students to begin by engaging in open-ended thinking without a clear focus or goal behind it. This was the purpose of the gaming and gaming log.

Students submitted three gaming logs throughout the week in which they focused on gaming. Here are the instructions for that portion of the assignment:

You are playing a medieval-themed video game to jumpstart academic inquiry towards generating a research topic for your paper for this course. I suggested Skyrim, Assassin's Creed: Valhalla, Medieval Dynasty, Lord of the Rings Online, or Kingdom Come: Deliverance. You may use any medieval-themed video game. It does need to be a video game, not a tabletop RPG or other type of game.

If you need help with gaming, or gaming materials, please see Michael Fetters in the Gaming Lab: <https://www.lindenwood.edu/library/about-the-lindenwood-library/media-gaming-lab/>

You are required to play the game for 6-10 hours. You may play longer if you wish. I recommend splitting this into at least 3 sessions, rather than trying to marathon it—it will be easier to keep track of things you notice and what you did in those shorter sessions.

You will be keeping a log each time you game throughout the week. Those logs should all be uploaded as Word documents to this same assignment portal—you won't see them all on your end, but don't worry—if you upload multiple files, I will see them

all. Do save your logs on your own computer or in the Cloud as backup in case there is any glitch or question later.

For your initial gaming log, please note the following information:

1. The game you are playing, and why you selected this one.
2. What character you are playing (race/gender/class/occupation). If you were able to select and create your own character, why did you select this one?
3. how long you played.
4. What did you do during this session? Be as specific and detailed as possible without going overboard and giving a play-by-play. For example:
 - talked with a shopkeeper; purchased weapons and armor
 - traveled from [name of city] to [name of city] to [activity]
 - killed a soldier and was sent to prison
 - escaped prison by [fill in means by which you got out]
 - spoke to [character] about [thing]
 - killed a wolf and skinned it; sold the skin for coin at shop

And so forth. Don't worry if you can't remember everything you did, and you don't necessarily have to log EVERYTHING—just make sure you hit the highlights and have a good number of log entries indicative of your interaction with the game world.

6. Write a sentence or two about your impressions of the game world—what are you noticing about the graphics, about the game play, about the storyline, about the game map and navigation, at this point?
7. Write a sentence or two about what you enjoyed most in this session, and what you want to tackle in the next session—what are you focusing on?
8. Note anything particular you want to keep in mind about the game's relationship, or possible relationship, to the medieval world—any questions or comments/ observations you have at this point about this relationship, how the game relates to medieval concerns, etc.

And that's it! Submit!

For subsequent gaming logs, repeat #3-7 above.

Again, you should aim for at least three logs, but more is always better. :)

This part of the project is scored holistically on submission of at least three completed logs, whether those logs are complete/include all information requested, and the quality of your notes and observations/questions—don't go overboard noting every, single thing, but don't skimp, either. You know my standards, I know you can meet them. Have fun!

Notice that in this assignment, students are simply asked to observe and record what they have done, without directing them to focus on anything in particular. There was no clear purpose here other than playing and observing their play. However, their answers to these prompts cued the professor in to intrinsic interests they displayed in their gaming choices, as well as what they

were interested in/ elected to record of their gaming, and those in turn provided the professor with the raw material to help the students shape their research agendas.

Of the 21 students still enrolled in the class by this point in the semester, 18 completed the gaming logs. Figures 5 and 6 are anonymized representative samples from these students' gaming logs, which provide a good example of how they went about this assignment, along with the professor's feedback, which shows how she helps them convert their observations into possible research topics. As general education students with little if any background in medieval studies, they would almost certainly come up with far more limited options on their own; this project allowed the professor to help them harness their own interests and find ways those are resonant with the course subject matter, in an organic way that is less daunting than a traditional academic approach to identifying a research topic. They enjoyed gaming, and then the professor showed them how to use that experience to locate potential research questions that were intrinsically interesting to them through their gaming logs, cluing them in to how they might think about this project beyond the most familiar and not necessarily personally interesting possibilities (castles, royalty, chivalry, etc.) they might choose if left to their own devices regarding subject selection.

Sample gaming log and professor feedback #1

k. The main character's brother wants to leave and go to England so that he doesn't have to pledge loyalty to the King of the North. Their crew and a good portion of the people in the village decide to leave with him. I chose to take the supplies that I had taken from the raid on the man who killed the main character's parents, much to the chagrin of the brother. The king disowns the main character because of this choice and we make our way to England.

3. I like how realistic the game is. If you get into the water while it's super cold, you'll die. I dislike how difficult it is to find gold and mysteries because mounts are pretty difficult to use while trying to climb.

4. I love the raids on other islands. I died several times during the first raid because I kept getting set on fire by my own crew, but it's fine. Next session, I'm excited to continue the story in England.

5. I like how it's showing how easy, yet difficult it was for people to just pack up their entire life and settle elsewhere.

Submitted Files: (click to load)
Game Log.docx

Assessment
Grade (100 / 100)
A

Assignment Comments
You've identified several interests here: how people coped with the cold; migration and resettlement practices; raiding practices; geography/ flora and fauna of Norway. Any of these would make a great research project; which of them do you feel particularly interested in/ really want to learn more about?
Melissa Elmes, Mar 14 at 5:51pm

Figure 5. Sample student gaming log 1 with professor's feedback

Sample gaming log and professor feedback #2

The screenshot shows a document editor interface. On the left, a student's gaming log is displayed, consisting of three numbered paragraphs. Paragraph 3 compares Skellige islands to Novigrad. Paragraph 4 describes the student's enjoyment of Skellige town and its medieval architecture. Paragraph 5 notes the influence of Norse culture and religion on Skellige. Below the log, the date 'Sunday March 5th, 2023' is shown, followed by a list of activities: starting at 11 am, logging into the game, and a detailed log of events including looting, escaping a guard, and meeting Yennefer. On the right side of the editor, a sidebar shows the word count (1,084 words), the submitted file name 'MedievalWorldGamingLog-HannaFales.docx', and an assessment section with a grade of 'A' out of 100. Below the assessment, an 'Assignment Comments' section contains a message from Professor Melissa Elmes, dated March 14 at 5:33p, praising the student's identification of interests in medieval culture and suggesting further research.

3. The Skellige islands are much different from the flatlands of Novigrad. Skellige is tall, snowy, and mountainous. Novigrad is grassy, warm, and flat.

4. I really enjoyed exploring the Skellige town and comparing it to the town in Novigrad I was at yesterday. Novigrad seems based on medieval France-inspired architecture, lifestyle, and fashion. Skellige is Norse inspired. Next session I want to keep progressing further to the story.

5. Skellige, compared to Novigrad, is clearly more influenced by Norse culture and religion, multiple characters throughout the town can be heard praying to Freya and referencing Ragnarok.

Sunday March 5th, 2023

1. Started at 11 am and stopped at 2 pm, for 3 hours.
2. Log:
 - Loaded into the castle and accidentally looted an off-limits item, prompting *every single guard* to become hostile and chase me, I had to flee, barely escaping with Geralt's life.
 - Met Yennefer at the next location, supposedly a place where Ciri had used her ancient magic. Using the mask we stole, we were able to see snippets of the past and follow where Ciri went, where we ended up in a small village.
 - The villagers helped Yen and Geralt, telling them to find the man who helped Ciri

Word Count: 1,084 words

Submitted Files: (click to load)

MedievalWorldGamingLog-HannaFales.docx

Assessment

Grade (100 / 100)

A

Assignment Comments

You've identified several interests in this log--the supernatural beings, how society is structured; how medieval towns developed/ architecture and layout of towns and cities in different medieval cultures. Any of these would make a great research project; which of them do you feel particularly interested in/ really want to learn more about?

Melissa Elmes, Mar 14 at 5:33p

Add a Comment

Figure 6. Sample student gaming log 2 with professor's feedback

After they completed their gaming logs, students also completed a gaming reflection comprised of eight questions. This reflection took a metacognitive approach to help students more intentionally tap into their intrinsic interests and begin to connect their gaming experience to the course and course readings. Here is the prompt:

Review your gaming logs from week eight, and respond thoughtfully, in narrative form, to the following questions:

1. What did you notice the most about the game world's geography?
2. What did you notice most about the game world's people/s?
3. What did you notice most about the game world's play and mechanics?
3. What did your character spend most of their time on while you were gaming/ what quests and adventures did you undertake?
4. What did you tend to focus on--Exploring? Fighting/ Battle? Interacting with other characters? Making things? Killing things? Traveling? Cooking/eating? Shopping?
5. What questions arose concerning the game world and/or the medieval world it mimics as you were playing (or, what questions arise as you are reviewing these game logs?)

6. What topics or subjects come up for you in reviewing this game log related to the medieval world paralleling this game world that you might be interested in learning more about?

7. Was there anything in game that reminded you of anything from the readings so far this term? (do not have to be in the same culture or society that produced the text/s)

8. What, if anything, did playing this game help you think about or (try to) understand about the medieval world? If it didn't, in reviewing your notes and thinking about your game play, is there anything now that it makes you consider or reconsider concerning our course materials so far?

Submit your reflection to this assignment portal by Sunday, March 5 at 11:59 p.m.

This assignment is being scored holistically on completion and thoughtfulness in that completion--put some effort in it and answer all the questions, and you get full credit.

17 of 21 students still enrolled in the class at that point in the semester completed the gaming reflection. Figures 7 and 8 are examples of the completed reflections, again with professorial feedback alerting students to the things she noticed they were focusing on which might make good research topics.

Sample gaming reflection with professor feedback #1

The screenshot shows a document editor interface. On the left, a student's reflection is visible, containing several paragraphs and a question. The text includes: "and I found those to be interesting, and quite helpful for finding weapons and such. I created and upgraded a few weapons, but besides that, I didn't go on my quests, but I did kill a few people, and got coins and gems because of it, so that's something." followed by question 5, a paragraph about mythical elements, question 6, a paragraph about medieval writings, question 7, and a paragraph about a game cutscene. On the right, a sidebar provides metadata: "Word Count: 859 words", "Submitted Files: (click to load)", a link to "Gaming reflection - Josh Calloni.docx", "Assessment Grade (100 / 100)", a "Complete" dropdown menu, and "Assignment Comments" which includes a comment from Melissa Elmes dated Mar 21 at 5:25pm.

Figure 7. Sample student reflection 1 with professorial feedback

Sample gaming reflection with professor's feedback #2

fantasy influence. Of the people encountered, I always love the Khajit cat people due to their snarky attitudes and cunning demeanors. Along with them, I have an affinity for the Argonians due to them being lizard-esque yet display a wide range of demeanors. Some are sellswords who are very harsh while others are very polite and friendly.

3. What did you notice most about the game world's play and mechanics?

The game world's play and mechanics are quite good for being over a decade old. At times it was clunky and I had a few hard crashes as I played but overall the archery mechanics felt fluid enough. The well known Bethesda lockpicking mini game is also a fun little way of feeling like you're actually breaking into a locked item.

3. What did your character spend most of their time on while you were gaming/ what quests and adventures did you undertake?

I spent a lot of my time focused on questing and skilling to the point where I could advance my quests. I started out with a very big idea of chasing down the 24 stones of Barenziah until I remembered that it is considered an end game quest because almost half of the stones require doing various main questlines.

4. What did you tend to focus on--Exploring? Fighting/ Battle? Interacting with other characters? Making things? Killing things? Traveling? Cooking/eating? Shopping?

I tended to focus on the speed running and skilling aspect of the game. This is because I know how big Skyrim is and I could have easily spent all my time training my skills in a tedious manner if I hadn't been willing to be quick thinking.

5. What questions arose concerning the game world and/or the medieval world it mimics as you were playing (or, what questions arise as you are reviewing these game logs?)

A few questions I had were:

How were some real world weapons shown in game used in medieval combat?

Why were spears not as prevalent in the game as I would have liked? They were a weapon that could easily be used by peasants in the real world.

How have race relations changed and shifted during the Med. period?

6. What topics or subjects come up for you in reviewing this game log related to the medieval world paralleling this game world that you might be interested in learning more about?

I would like to one day expand my knowledge on medieval blacksmithing and weaponsmithing. It was fun being able to find resources or buy them to upgrade my equipment as I played and the fact that they allow you to do it at a blacksmithing shop adds to the immersion.


Word Count: 775 words

Submitted Files: (click to load)

Assessment
Grade (100 / 100)

Complete ▾

Assignment Comments

 This reflection indicates interests in the relationships of different cultures and peoples in, for example, trade towns and other places where cultural exchange can take place, archery, weapons and combat styles, race relations in the medieval world, medieval blacksmithing and weaponsmithing, and secret societies/ cults, and any of these would make a good research subject and presentation, in addition to those I noted on your gaming log.

Melissa Elmes, Mar 21 at 5:45pm

Figure 8. Sample student reflection 2 with professorial feedback

From here, the project shifted into high gear, with students selecting their topics and then conducting their research towards writing their annotated bibliographies. Here is a list of the subjects the students selected for their research projects:

- Medieval armor (x 2)
- Magic in the Middle Ages
- Medieval monasticism
- Medieval map-making and maps
- Christianity and religious intolerance of paganism in Medieval Europe
- Medieval trade routes
- Medieval science and technology
- Everyday life in the Middle Ages
- Women Viking Warriors
- Relationships between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons
- Social class and mobility in medieval Europe
- Climate in medieval Nordic countries
- Knightly training practices
- Medieval alchemy

This is a substantially more varied and more interesting list than might typically be expected from general education students with little to no familiarity with the Middle Ages prior to taking the course; in fact, it is a list of subjects that would be impressive generated in an upper-division course. It is also a list that very clearly reflects personal interests in its variety and specificity,

and revisiting the list of self-reported majors from the Participants section of this article shows there is a high likelihood that their gaming logs and reflections, combined with professorial feedback, enabled some students to select subjects related in some way to their majors as well as to other areas of personal interest. For example, medieval trade routes and social class and mobility could be interesting to someone in business administration or entrepreneurial studies; climate in Nordic countries could be interesting to someone in environmental sciences; and so forth.

The next phase of the assignment, the penultimate one to the writing of the report, itself, was the annotated bibliography. This is typically an assignment used in upper-division courses, but that in particular for students who are unfamiliar with a subject and struggle with writing, is an invaluable means by which to collect their sources and figure out how they work together prior to writing. Here are the instructions, together with examples from annotated bibliographies generated by students in other classes, that the professor provided students with for this assignment:

In preparation for your research project, you will identify 6-8 secondary sources that might be useful in developing their project. You must use the University databases/credible scholarly sources like books written by experts and peer-reviewed articles for at least half 3-(4) of the sources for your project. You will explain in a brief annotation to each bibliographic entry what kinds of information each source provides and how it helps you understand more about your topic. The citations must be completed in MLA, APA, or Chicago format.

We completed a library research workshop in class during week six. If you would benefit from more help with using the library databases for research, please reach out to the LARC research specialists! They are here to help you!

Directions

The purpose of an annotated bibliography is to provide a brief description of each source, noting its usefulness and relevance in the investigation you are conducting. A well-done annotated bibliography should make the actual development/writing up of your research project significantly easier, because you have already determined what each source offers, and how you intend to employ it (or not) in your essay.

There are essentially two steps to creating an annotated bibliographic entry:

1. Cite the book, article, document, or website using the appropriate style (in this case, MLA, APA, or Chicago).
2. Write a concise summary of the contents of each book or article. Include one or more sentences that (a) evaluate the authority and/or background of the author (credibility), (b) describe how this source illuminates or complicates your topic (c) explain how you will use the source for your project and (d) compare or contrast this work with others you have cited in terms of what they offer about the subject. Entries may include targeted quotes from the source that help contextualize your choice to use them in your research.

Below are a few examples of annotated bibliographic entries:

Britanniacoinco. "Minting Technology through the Ages." The Britannia Coin Company of Royal Wootton Bassett, 17 Nov. 2020, <https://britanniacoincompany.com/blog/minting-technology-through-the-ages/>.

Britannia coin company is a coin dealership company that buys and sells a wide range of rare, interesting, and collectible coins from around the world. Those that work for this company are members of the BNTA or British Numismatic Trade Association that holds the reputation of the trade with alerts and hazards such as stolen coins and forgeries to offer more reassurance. This source offers information on the first coins, refining techniques, and the minting and clipping of coins. I will be using this source alongside "Medieval Coin Making", "Medieval Money", and "Medieval Money and Coins" to compare and combine information about the first coins and how they were created.

Godfrey, Esther. "'Jane Eyre', from Governess to Girl Bride." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, vol. 45, no. 4, 2005, pp. 853–71.

Dr. Esther Godfrey is an Associate Professor in English at the University of South Carolina Upstate with a specialty in nineteenth-century British literature and women's and gender studies. "The plot conventions of Jane's rise to fortune and the marriage union that concludes the novel suggests conservative affirmations of class and gender identities that seemingly contradict the novel's more disruptive aspects." Godfrey is exploring the shifts in gender roles for Jane throughout the novel and how she was placed into a middle class (wealthy) family as a child in which she didn't fit in. But then she was sent away to a low-class school where there were no gender roles. After her time at school, Jane was then thrown into real life where the position she wanted required her femininity to be at the forefront of her character, which is something she was never taught. Godfrey argues that "gender identities are inseparable from Jane's working-class affiliations" and that Jane's character development throughout the novel is a mix of her own self and also being pulled in a million directions by society. This source will add to my research essay by giving a perspective on character development within questionable gender roles.

Thomas, Bronwen. "What Is Fanfiction and Why Are People Saying Such Nice Things about It??" *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, vol. 3, University of Nebraska Press, 2011, pp. 1–24, <https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.3.2011.0001>.

In this article, Bronwen Thomas' exploration of fanfiction encompasses many important discussions about the topic, including the history of fanfiction, how it makes us rethink basic narratological concepts, and the value of studying fanfiction through the lens of literature, versus that of anthropology or psychology. Thomas specifically seeks to understand how fanfiction is situated in the context of methodology and literature, rivaling much of the other existing academic studies on fanfiction, which understand the topic through a sociological and psychoanalytical perspective. This article is thus commenting on the practices of fanfiction, not the individuals who write them. Thomas' research provides me with an excellent basis to

explain just how creative writing has developed within fanfiction communities, and additionally how fanfiction is breaking boundaries within creative writing.

13 of the 21 students completed the annotated bibliography. Figures 9-11 are examples of completed annotated bibliographies with professorial feedback.

Sample, annotated bibliography #1

The image shows a screenshot of a digital document viewer. On the left, the document content is visible, titled "Annotated Bibliography: Medieval Trade & Economics". It contains two entries:

Adelson, H. L. (1960). Early Medieval Trade Routes. *The American Historical Review*, 65(2), 271–287. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1842869>

Howard L. Adelson was a Medieval Studies professor at the Graduate School and University Center of the City University of New York. According to JSTOR, the cited article was originally published in the second quarter rendition of the 65th volume of *The American Historical Review* (AHR). This publication is the official publication of the American Historical Association and is published by the Oxford University Press. This source helps complement the writer's topic by offering detailed information regarding trade routes and how various rare/luxury goods were transferred vast distances across Europe, Africa, The Middle East, and Asia. The writer plans on using this source to highlight how Medieval period merchants were willing to go to great lengths seeking out wealth. In addition to this, the writer plans on looking into the numismatic nature of early medieval trade with the minting of various coinage.

Postan, M. (1928). Credit in Medieval Trade. *The Economic History Review*, 1(2), 234–261. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2590334>

Michael Moissey Postan was a famed Jewish-British Economic History professor at the University of Cambridge. According to JSTOR, the cited article was published in *The Economic History Review* in January of 1928. *The Economic History Review* is a peer reviewed journal

On the right side of the viewer, there is a sidebar with the following information:

- Student Viewed Document: Apr 17 at 10:59pm
- Word Count: 1,011 words
- Submitted Files: (click to load)
- 22% Annotated Bibliography, Med. Trade & Econ..docx
- Assessment
- Grade (100 / 100)
- A
- Assignment Comments
- You have done a very strong job with this assignment, and these are all quality peer-reviewed sources that will be great use to you in completing your research essay. (Melissa Elmes, Apr 17 at 9:33pm)
- Add a Comment
- Submit

Figure 9. Sample annotated bibliography 1 with professorial feedback

Sample annotated bibliography 2

Annotated Bibliography

Barrett, James H. "What Caused the Viking Age?" *Antiquity*, vol.82, no. 317, 2008, pp.671-85.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003598X00097301>.

Professor Barrett, Senior Fellow, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research at the University of Cambridge, is published in multiple academic journals dedicated to research including *Antiquity*. In this article Barrett takes a cause and effect approach through time to examine the Anglo-Saxon Viking relationship. He eliminates the traditional determinations discussed in the other sources cited in this bibliography. He offers for consideration a culture overpopulated with men engaged in treasure hunts for wealth to offer potential brides. This theory of a Viking treasure hunt resulting in the conquering of Anglo-Saxon England provides the research essay a non-traditional cause that resulted in the relationship of the two medieval societies. This source will support my essay topic about the relationship between the Anglo-Saxon's and the Vikings.

Griffiths, David. "Rethinking the Early Viking Age in the West." *Antiquity*, vol. 93, no. 368, 2019, pp.468-77. <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2018.199>.

Student Viewed Document: Apr 18 at 8:12am
 Word Count: 1,137 words

Submitted Files: (click to load)
27% [annotated bibliography viking.docx](#)

Assessment
 Grade (100 / 100)
A

Assignment Comments

You have done a very strong job with this assignment, and these are all quality peer-reviewed sources that will be great use to you in completing your research essay.

One thing to keep in mind: while many of these sources discuss Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Saxon England, current trends in the field of medieval studies have recognized that modern misappropriations of "Anglo-Saxon" are employed in racist contexts and for racist purposes, so scholars have moved away from using the term in their writing, instead employing "early medieval England" or going

Figure 10. Sample annotated bibliography 2 with professorial feedback

Annotated Bibliography

Dybdahl, Audun. "Climate and Demographic Crises in Norway in Medieval and Early Modern Times." *Holocene*, vol. 22, no. 10, Oct. 2012, pp. 1159–67. EBSCOhost,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0959683612441843>.

Audun Dybdahl was a Norwegian historian. He was a professor of history at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology and was published by SAGE in the *Holocene* journal. It offers an explanation as to how the climate can change the demographic of an area through the loss of crops and an increase in predatory animals and diseases. For this research project, I will use this paper can help build an understanding of the harshness of climate due to the lack of modern technology in earlier centuries can force or halt migration.

Sjögren, Per. "Climate, Cod and Crops: Coastal Land Use in the SW Barents Sea Region during the Past 2.5 Ka." *Holocene*, vol. 19, no. 5, July 2009, pp. 703–16. EBSCOhost,
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0959683609105294>, https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0959683609105294?casa_token=mp7fBSw_FnEAAAAA:w0X8GU0HMvHx19j51qxJ5_EwJL_NQmVGTuNPoOL6eMFT-GVjMKbD-QnWIZ_dJOzqzWRsrr6iZRrD

Word Count: 758 words

Submitted Files: (click to load)
26% [Annotated Bibliography.docx](#)

Assessment
 Grade (90 / 100)
A

Assignment Comments

There are several typos/ errors in usage that suggest you revised some entries but then didn't proofread, for example in the first entry where you write: " For this research project, I will use this paper can help build an understanding of the harshness of climate due to the lack of modern technology in earlier centuries can force or halt migration." Make sure to italicize journal and book titles throughout. Aside from these points,

Figure 11. Sample annotated bibliography 3 with professorial feedback

After the annotated bibliographies were submitted and received feedback, students completed the post-gaming survey and had three weeks to complete the final written project for this graduate attribute signature assignment.

Results

In this study, a total of 25 students initially enrolled in the course. Throughout the semester, 21 students successfully completed the course, representing an 84% retention rate. To evaluate their engagement in the pre-gaming phase, 18 students agreed to participate in a survey. However, one student dropped out before reaching the halfway mark, leaving a total of 17 students who completed the survey. Among the 21 students who remained enrolled at the end of the term, 15 students successfully completed the project, yielding a completion rate of 71.4%. The breakdown of grades for the major components of the assignment is as follows:

1. Gaming Log:
 - Complete: 18 students achieved an A grade.
 - Incomplete: 3 students received an F grade.
2. Gaming Reflection:
 - Complete: 17 students earned an A grade.
 - Incomplete: 4 students received an F grade.
3. Annotated Bibliography (Letter Grade):
 - A: 12 students
 - B: 1 student
 - F: 8 students
4. Final Project (Letter Grade):
 - A: 3 students
 - B: 7 students
 - C: 5 students
 - D: 0 students
 - F: 6 students

These findings indicate a generally high level of engagement and completion among the students who remained enrolled. The majority of students successfully completed the gaming log and reflection tasks. However, the annotated bibliography component exhibited a wider range of grades, with fewer students attaining high marks. Similarly, the overall final project grades demonstrated a varied distribution, with a notable number of students achieving lower grades. Preliminarily these results are evenly divided between the “fun” aspects of the assignment (gaming log and gaming reflection) and the “hard” aspects of the assignment (annotated bibliography and report) and thus may indicate students’ comfort levels with the more academic components. However, the students’ varied levels of success in different aspects of the assignment suggest a need for further examination of the factors influencing performance in the annotated bibliography and final project components.

Following the completion of the gaming phase, a post-gaming survey was administered to assess the students' experience with the approach of using gaming to develop their research projects. 16 students initiated the survey, with 15 of them providing complete responses. The survey aimed to measure their engagement with the project, as well as evaluate the extent to which it aligned with the graduate attributes and RISE goals of the course.

16 students began the post-gaming survey and 15 of them completed all answers. Here is a summary of their responses to the questions about their experience with this approach to using gaming to develop a research project. These questions were developed to measure their engagement with and experience of both the project, itself, and the graduate attributes and RISE goals.

The survey responses revealed the following summary of students' experiences and engagement:

1. "Were you able to locate a topic, or several topics, for research through your gaming experience in this class?" (15 students responding):
 - Yes: 15
 - No: 0
2. "How helpful was the process of gaming and reflection in coming up with a topic of research for this class?" (16 students responding):
 - Not helpful at all: 1
 - Slightly helpful: 2
 - Moderately helpful: 4
 - Very helpful: 9
3. "In comparison to other approaches to identifying a topic you've used in the past, was the use of gaming to come up with a research topic effective for you? (16 students responding):
 - No: 2
 - Somewhat: 3
 - Yes: 11

All students who responded to the first question self-reported as successful in locating topics for their research through the gaming experience in the class. The process of gaming and reflection was perceived as highly beneficial by the majority of students, with 9 students finding it very helpful. Moreover, when comparing this approach to other methods they had used in the past, a significant number of students (11 out of 16) considered the use of gaming to be effective in identifying their research topics. These responses highlight the positive impact of incorporating gaming as a means to inspire and generate research ideas among students. The findings suggest that the gaming process facilitated topic discovery and offered a valuable alternative to traditional approaches, aligning with the objectives of promoting engagement, critical thinking, and original research within the course.

Regarding the students' level of interest and the significance of the professor's input in the research topic selection process, the survey results revealed the following responses:

1. "Did you find yourself immediately interested in one or more topics identified in your gaming experience and/or reflection without, or prior to, the professor's input?" (16 students responding):
 - No: 3
 - Yes: 13
2. "How significant was the professor's input on your gaming reflections in aiding you to decide on a research topic?" (16 students responding):
 - Very; I could not have located a topic without the professor's input: 3

- Somewhat; I had located several possibilities and the professor's input helped me select one: 7
 - Somewhat; I knew which topic I was leaning toward and the professor's input validated that: 6
3. "How comfortable were you with completing the research on it once you selected a topic based on your gaming and reflection? Select all that apply" (16 students responding):
- Very, once the topic was identified, because I was interested in it and wanted to learn more: 7
 - Very, once the topic was identified, because I felt empowered to research something I wanted to instead of something assigned to me: 4
 - Somewhat, once the topic was identified, because I knew where to start with my research: 6
 - Somewhat, once the topic was identified, because I wasn't interested in anything in the game and just needed something to research: 1

These responses indicate that the majority of students (13 out of 16) immediately found themselves interested in one or more topics identified during their gaming experience and/or reflection, even without prior input from the professor. Additionally, professorial input was perceived as significant in aiding student decision-making processes with varying degrees of influence. Some students credited the professor's input as essential in their topic selection, while others found it helpful in validating their own preferences.

The students reported a high level of comfort in completing the research once a topic was identified. The majority expressed strong motivation to conduct their research due to their genuine interest in the chosen topic and the sense of empowerment in researching something of their own choice. Others felt comfortable because they knew where to start their research. Only one student indicated a relatively lower level of comfort, having selected a topic mainly out of necessity rather than personal interest.

In comparison to the student experience with research in other general education courses, the survey responses provide insights into their research experience and levels of enjoyment, time spent on research, excitement/interest in completing the project, and confidence in their research and project.

1. "Compared to research you have done for other gen ed courses, how was the research experience on your selected topic for this course?" (16 students responding):
 - No more enjoyable: 4 students
 - Somewhat more enjoyable: 3 students
 - Significantly more enjoyable: 9 students
2. "Compared to research you have done for other projects, which of the following seems true?" (16 students responding):
 - I spent significantly less time researching: 0 students
 - I did just the same amount of research: 7 students
 - Elaboration:
 - It was hard to find research on the topic: 3 students
 - I procrastinated and did not have the time to do the research I wanted to: 2 students

- I did enough research to meet the assignment criteria and stopped: 3 students
 - I wanted to do research but didn't have time: 1 student
 - I had too much else to do and didn't prioritize this research: 1 student
 - I found myself doing more research: 9 students
 - Elaboration:
 - I found a lot of good research on the subject: 2 students
 - I was more interested in the topic, so I spent more time looking it up: 6 students
 - I enjoyed learning about the topic and lost track of time: 1 student
3. "You have used gaming to identify a topic, and completed research and an annotated bibliography; all that is left now is to write up your results and submit your final assignment. How excited/interested are you at this point in completing your research project and sharing your formal research project with the professor?" (16 students responding):
- Not at all: 2 students
 - Somewhat: 3 students
 - Moderately: 11 students
 - Very: 0 students
4. "How confident are you in your research and research project for this class at this point?" (16 students responding):
- Not at all: 0 students
 - Somewhat: 7 students
 - Moderately: 5 students
 - Very: 4 students
5. "How do your answers to the previous two questions compare to your experiences with research work conducted for other general education courses in terms of your interest in completing and sharing the project with your professor and your confidence in your research?" (16 students responding):
- I am significantly less interested and confident in this project: 0 students
 - I am somewhat less interested and confident in this project: 2 students
 - I am about the same in terms of my interest and confidence in this project: 5 students
 - I am somewhat more interested and confident in this project: 5 students
 - I am significantly more interested and confident in this project: 4 students

These responses indicate that students found the research experience on the selected topic for this course more enjoyable compared to research they had conducted in other general education courses. While the time spent on research varied, with some students conducting more research due to interest in the topic, others completing the required amount, and a few facing challenges in finding relevant materials, overall, students expressed moderate to high levels of excitement/interest and confidence in completing and sharing their research project with the professor. A significant number of students reported increased interest and confidence in this project compared to their experiences with research in other general education courses.

The survey concluded with the following questions and responses:

1. "How likely are you to research further on the topic you selected for this research project beyond your project for this class?" (16 students responding):
 - Not at all: 6 students
 - Fairly likely: 8 students
 - Extremely likely: 2 students
2. "Did you find yourself more interested/invested in your topic for this research project than you expected to be?" (16 students responding):
 - No: 5 students
 - Somewhat: 4 students
 - Yes: 7 students
3. "Overall, and concerns about grades aside, how intellectually valuable/rewarding have you found this research to be on a personal level?" (16 students responding):
 - Not personally valuable/rewarding: 2 students
 - Somewhat personally valuable/rewarding: 8 students
 - Very personally valuable/rewarding: 6 students

The responses indicate a mixed range of likelihood to continue researching the chosen topic beyond the requirements of the course, with a majority of students (8 out of 16) expressing a fair likelihood of further exploration. However, a significant number of students (7 out of 16) found themselves more interested or invested in their research topic than they had initially expected.

On a personal level, while a small number of students (2 out of 16) did not find the research personally valuable or rewarding, the majority (14 out of 16) expressed varying degrees of personal value and reward, with 8 students finding it somewhat valuable/rewarding and 6 students finding it very valuable/rewarding.

Discussion

The purpose of the study at the center of this article was to determine the effectiveness of using gaming as a means to jump-start the major research project in a general education literature course in 1. Helping to retain students 2. Keeping them engaged 3. Resulting in better work and 4. Resulting in a successful and positive learning experience and outcome in comparison to a traditional academic approach to this work. This effectiveness was to be measured via student survey and reflection, professorial assessment of the quality and quantity of student work, and the number of students who persisted with the project and the course. The assignment at the center of this study was the signature assignment for The Medieval World general education literature course, which was aligned with the Lindenwood University graduate attributes of analytical thinker, adaptable problem-solving, effective communication, and lifelong learning, and pedagogical goals for rigor, inclusiveness, support, and engagement.

In all, 21 of 23 students initially enrolled in the class following the add/drop period retained to the end of the semester, resulting in a retention rate of 91.3%. Of those students, three completed the semester with a grade of AF, attendance failure. Of the 21 students still enrolled when the projects were due, 15 submitted the project. However, adjusting for the three students with attendance failure who had essentially stopped taking the course, this raises the completion rate to 15 of 18, or 83.3%. Looking deeper at the completion rates of all components of the project, all of the students except those three AF individuals submitted their gaming logs, all but one

beyond those who had stopped attending submitted their gaming reflection, thirteen submitted their annotated bibliographies, and fifteen students submitted the final project. This reveals that while nearly all of the students engaged with the initial project components that required less “academic” work, when it came to those assignments requiring more writing and additional skills such as bibliographic work and structuring an essay, fewer students remained engaged. Adjusted for the students no longer attending class by this point, however, reveals that five students did not complete the annotated bibliography, which corrected to only two students not completing the final project, itself. These results suggest that overall, using gaming to jumpstart the research project successfully met the goal to retain and engage students in the assignment and the course.

Continuing the focus on engagement and adding the question of quality and quantity of student work, in addition to the relatively high level of completion of the project, students overwhelmingly wrote significantly more for the project components than they otherwise would have on, for example, a traditional 3-5 page paper. The average number of words submitted per student for the gaming log was 1,063; for the gaming reflection, 527; for the annotated bibliography, 967 and for the final project, 1,255. This was in addition to other writing produced for this class (discussion boards, a compare/contrast essay, and a historical contexts essay, plus in-class ungraded writing). For a general education, 200-level literature course, this is a substantial output in terms of writing for students, yet the professor received no feedback that there was too much writing, which is under normal circumstances a common comment in her course evaluations and end-of-course reflection assignments in her general education literature classes. The students completing this project appear not to have perceived the amount of writing they were doing as being onerous, and this can in preliminary fashion be attributed to their perception of the gaming logs and reflection not counting as “real writing” despite the level of cognitive engagement these assignment required of them. In addition to the quantity of work completed, the quality of student work on this project is also clearly evidenced in the grade distribution, more so in the first three elements of the project, but the final project also skews measurably towards above average to excellent work. Significantly, all of the failing grades across the project were due to non-submission of work, and therefore none of the Fs on any component was attributable to either plagiarism or the use of ChatGPT/ AI to write the assignment. This indicates the assignment’s strength as one for which students want to complete their own work rather than resort to cheating, which corroborates it as a means of promoting engagement and rigor. The project was therefore successful in meeting the goal of improving both quantity and quality of student work.

Regarding the efficacy of using gaming to jumpstart student research, in the post-survey 15 of the 16 students responding reported the approach was somewhat to very helpful, with one student reporting it was “not at all” helpful. This student, however, self-disclosed to the professor that he had responded with “not at all” because he already knew what he wanted to research prior to beginning the gaming process. 14 of the 16 respondents further found this approach effective in comparison to other approaches they have used in the past, again one of those who reported not finding it as effective being the same who already knew what he wanted to research and therefore, not answering this question based on the gaming experience. These responses indicate that per student perception, this approach was highly effective in achieving its aims.

Regarding measurement of student progress towards attaining the graduate attributes and RISE goals this project was designed to support, the author finds that the assignment was encouragingly successful. Clearly, this assignment was designed for rigor, with multiple components requiring several skills and competencies that were spread across a long period of time within the semester. Students responded positively to that rigor, as evidenced in the quality and quantity of work completed. That the pre-project survey indicated a mixed comfort level concerning students' perception of their ability to come up with a research topic, while on the post-survey they unanimously reported having been able to do so, indicates increased comfort with independent and critical thinking; and that most students reported they felt somewhat to very confident in their ability to complete the project after completing the gaming logs and reflection and selecting a topic indicates adaptive problem-solving and that they felt supported to succeed. Students' self-reported greater interest in their research subject in comparison to other classes indicates that the professor's focus on inclusiveness in helping them use their intrinsic interests and the things they naturally gravitate toward in gaming to locate their research topic was successful. That 12 of the 16 reported their research experience in this class was more enjoyable than that conducted for other research classes, that 9 of the 16 reported they did significantly more research for this assignment than they did for other research assignments, and that 14 of 16 reported greater interest in completing and sharing their work for this project in comparison to work undertaken in other classes indicates the project's effectiveness at promoting engagement. And that 10 of the 16 reported being fairly or very likely to research further into their topic beyond this class indicates that this project supports the goal of cultivating lifelong learners.

This study has many limitations and areas in which improvements can be made. As this is the first time the author has conducted this type of pedagogical research, and there were so many variables that could be measured, this study is self-evidently too capacious in scope; future such efforts will be scaled back to measure one or two elements at a time. The study was conducted in a single class, which limits the results both in number of participants and in terms of effective comparison against other classes. Conducting similar studies in several courses, and doing so in courses which do, and do not, feature this project, will provide better means by which to measure its effectiveness as a means of promoting greater student retention, engagement, success, and satisfaction in general education literature courses in comparison to more traditional approaches. There were few control variables involved in this study, rendering the results, however encouraging, tentative in nature. With more experience, the author will better design the pre- and post-surveys, and a third survey following the completion and submission of the final project, itself might be a useful addition. Finally, while the retention and engagement results examined here are self-evidently positive and successful, beyond the students reporting their experiences with it in comparison to their other research projects the author is not convinced these can be confidently attributed to the assignment, itself, pointing to the biggest flaw in this study. In future, developing ways by which to measure more explicitly the effect of this project in association with other aspects of the class would resolve this issue.

In conclusion, these and any other limitations notwithstanding, based on this preliminary study the use of video gaming in this general education English course to harness students' intrinsic interests through game play, help students foster connections between those interests and course subject matter, and employment of metacognitive reflection to help them develop a line of

original inquiry leading to an independently completed research project, demonstrates clear success. The majority of students completing this project put far more time and effort into their work for this course than is typically the case with students in the author's past general education literature courses, measurable both by word counts and quality of submitted work. The majority of the students completing the survey who followed through with the project reported they were more engaged, more interested, and more confident in their research for this course than in other courses, and a substantial number indicated this assignment has strengths in developing lifelong learning habits. The majority of students who remained engaged in this project through its completion clearly demonstrated the graduate attributes it sought to foster and responded to the RISE pillars embedded throughout this project. That no student submitting work at any stage of the project made use of Chat GPT/ AI or other means of cheating recommends this approach as one that fosters a desire to complete their own work. And the project completion rate demonstrates it as a retention strength.

Circling back to the bigger-picture institutional concerns with student retention and engagement discussed at the beginning of this article, while the surveys employed in this study did not ask about students' Pell grant or socioeconomic status, there was not a large race/ ethnicity distribution, and only three students reported being first-generation, the gender breakdown in this class of a majority of the students identifying as male, coupled with the retention rate, suggests that using gaming to jumpstart the research project was an effective means of engaging and retaining male students in this literature course. A majority of the students completing the survey reported finding the assignment valuable and indicated it gave them an interest they would follow through on beyond the class, demonstrating strong satisfaction. The overall course retention rate was very strong, 21 of 23 students, and of those, only 1 earned a D and 1 an F; however, the number of attendance failures, 3, is higher than the author would like for it to be. In any future studies attempted these elements will be investigated more closely to ascertain more precisely what role, if any, this project plays in them, with an eye to continuing to develop this and similar assignments for general education courses in the interest of supporting success across these several student demographics.

Finally, this project also demonstrates in preliminary fashion that humanities research in the general education classroom holds value for students leading to retention and engagement when it is undertaken to intentionally pull together their interests, course subject matter, and university graduate attributes, using RISE as the foundation for course and project design. This is another area in which future research may yield important insights.

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