



Transforming Your Child’s Fortnite Obsession

DEVELOPING ANALYTICAL AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS THROUGH VIDEO GAMES

by Tedra Osell

“MY SON DOESN’T REALLY like to read. All he wants to do is play video games.”

As a language arts teacher and former English professor, I hear this all the time. Other parents tell me their kids only read comics or spend their time texting or watching YouTube videos.

But these kids *actually are reading*. What’s more, they’re practicing literary analysis, and if they’re texting, posting on game forums, or even leaving

comments on discussion forums, they’re also *writing*. It’s not the kind of reading and writing we think of as properly academic, but they develop the fundamental skill sets sophisticated readers and writers use. As educators we can tap into students’ preferred venues to bolster our instructional strategies and develop students’ reading and writing skills.

While homeschooling my 2e son through middle school, I never had him write a thing — even though I was a writing teacher. What we did

instead was talk. A lot. I asked him the kinds of questions I used to ask in my courses as I walked college freshmen through writing assignments: “Who is the audience for this essay?” “What elements of this advertisement are aimed at men or women?” “How does this story build inevitably toward its conclusion?” “Why does this movie shot make you feel like something bad is about to happen?”

In my son’s case, I asked those questions about the creative media he loved most: video games.

We can help kids develop their analytical and communicative skills by simply asking the right kinds of questions. Working with kids in this way encourages closer relationships and opens windows into their worlds. Think of it as a series of Socratic questions that steadily develop students' writing skills through personally meaningful experiences.

What's This Game About?

Yes, with younger kids, you're going to hear endless descriptions of Minecraft, stories that circle and go nowhere, and snippets of detail without any context. That's how early writing looks, too. You can teach kids how to *shape* their narratives and provide *illuminating detail* by asking them to hone their ramblings with questions such as: "So who is Steve?" "Why did you decide to build that kind of castle?" "When did you decide it needed a moat?" "Does the character you play have a name?" "Is there a backstory to this adventure?" "What are the various characters like — what are their personality traits, key phrases, or costumes?"

I found it easiest to have these conversations while walking around the neighborhood, driving in the car, cleaning the kitchen — anything that involves movement. With neither of us able to play with our phones or give in to other distractions, it was much easier to stay tuned into the discussion.

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With kids who are a bit older, you can start editorializing: "Oh! There are aliens in the lab because the anti-matter spectrometer broke! Maybe you should have told me that at the beginning of the story." "Wait, what's the context of this new Fortnite update?" "How would characters with so little body fat even survive in the age of dinosaurs?"

Helping students create a coherent narrative — with explanatory context, details, and descriptions — is what writing teachers do. Teaching them to summarize a complex world helps them identify key details and important elements. Asking questions about things that confuse, bother, or offend you helps them start to learn how to take into account potential counterarguments, how to tailor what they're saying to an audience, and how to address higher-order questions.

Are Video Games Art?

This question can take a variety of forms: "What's the difference between a video game and a movie?" "What's the difference between playing a game



and reading a story?" "What are the different kinds of video games?" "How are YouTube videos different than TV shows?"

In effect, you're introducing kids to literary theory by asking them to formulate an explanation of how a created world or narrative *works*, what the key elements are, and what makes it different than other kinds of creative work. You're asking them to categorize games and related content into genres — first-person shooters vs. world-building games, MMORPGs (massive multiplayer online role-playing games) vs. platformers, gaming videos vs. vlogs — and to list the elements that distinguish different categories. Over time, as you return to this topic, their categorization strategies will become more detailed and specific. They will be revising and rewriting in their heads, testing argumentative frameworks, and refining their interpretive models.

Who Is The Audience?

Again, there are plenty of variations here: "Who do you think plays this game?" "Do you think your younger cousin would like it?" "How do you understand texts that are all in emoji?"

This is also where older kids can explore popular criticism of games, phrasing concerns as questions rather than judgements: "So, what's your take on the argument that video games are too violent?" "Do you think the gaming world is hostile to women?" "I've heard that there are almost no video games with black women characters — is that true? Why do you think that is?"

Getting kids to *articulate* what they intuitively know about how audiences are constructed, how to communicate with different "readers," and how to identify and critique the target demographics goes a long way toward helping them become media-literate and self-aware communicators.

Even kids who never put pencil to paper or open a word processor can develop their analytical, expository, and argumentative skills to a very high level. Eventually and with guidance, your bright, impatient 2e kid will learn

to type, use dictation software, create powerpoint or video presentations, develop public speaking skills, or find the right medium to express what they have to say. When that happens, if you've walked them through the process of articulating their ideas and revising their arguments, they will be able to produce sophisticated, well-reasoned, organized narratives.

Top-notch writing is about expressing ideas more than mechanics, and you can help your kids learn to formulate and refine their ideas simply by being inquisitive and interested in the things they like thinking about.

Tedra Osell has been teaching writing for over 20 years in roles as varied as college professor, elementary classroom volunteer, homeschool mom, freelance editor, and writing coach. She's published for academic and general audiences on topics including 18th-century periodicals, 21st-century parenting, gifted education, and learning disabilities. Her brilliant and hilarious 2e son graduated from Bridges Academy in 2018, attends the University of California at Santa Cruz, and is an insightful critic of video games, movies, and literature. Tedra, who received her doctoral degree from the University of Washington, is associate director of the Art of Problem Solving Academy in Gaithersburg, Maryland, where she teaches language arts to high-achieving students in grades 2-11, including 2e students.

2e News

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WHAT IS 2e?

Twice-exceptional kids and adults display gifts, talents, and potential in some areas yet are challenged in other areas. Learning differences can include attentional challenges, Asperger's or autism spectrum disorder (ASD), sensory integration issues, and more.

Youngsters require both support and enrichment, as well as special counseling to help them grapple with the myriad obstacles that can stand in the way of their success. Children and adults alike benefit from understanding the duality of their needs, the importance of self-advocacy, and the possibilities for accommodations.