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GRADUATE HUMANITIES

A multidisciplinary program bringing together students and faculty from a variety of backgrounds to collaboratively explore the interdisciplinary intersections of the arts, cultural, historical, and literary studies within an open, exploratory, and experimental graduate-level educational environment.

Everyone has a story

In this issue, we share original essays from three graduate students who were in our Fall 2023 seminar, "Expository Writing For Research." These students, Michelle Ferrell, Jerriann Cochran, and Justin Whittington accepted my offer to work with them, as the editor of *Graduate Humanities*, so they could submit their essays for publication in this newsletter. It was a volunteer partnership and officially began soon after the semester ended.

When I (Trish) write to publish, I rewrite the original multiple times,

Recent GRADUATE

James Light II '23

Masters in History & Certificate in Appalachian Studies

Project Title: "The Drowning of the Cherokee Mother: On the Flooding of the Cherokee Capital of Chota"

Ready, Set, Gamify! *Educators, Time to Level Up*

By Michelle Ferrell

Oh, wow!
You must have a lot
    of patience.
I can't imagine…
Thank you for your service!
I don't know how you do it.
How do you keep your
    sanity?
Bless you, you are a saint…

< These are just a few of the comments I receive when asked what I do for employment. People don't always know the best way to respond to my answer. And I don't always know how to interpret them. Is their tone admiration, sarcasm, or a mixture?

Reading these intense reactions, you might think I'm in healthcare or work in a morgue. Maybe you would guess I serve in the military or investigate crime scenes. Perhaps psychiatry or spiritual leadership crossed your mind. Those professions, undeniably, require dedication, heroism, or percipiency. And, well, a few require a strong stomach.

My profession, on the other hand, requires a different set of skills.

So, who am I?
I'm a middle school English teacher.
And I'm proud to hold this title.

✦ ✦ ✦

Many individuals I've encountered over the 14 years I've been teaching are shocked at my ability to interact with middle schoolers almost daily. And in a way, it makes me feel like I possess a heroic superpower.

My profession might seem impossible to the outside world, but developing the young minds of our youth is my passion. I have worked with children ranging in age from 11 to 13, a group that is often misunderstood. I have learned as much about their language as I have taught them about what's officially known as English Language Arts, or ELA. And let me tell you, my students abundantly manifest the "A" in ELA.

*Here comes **Generation Alpha!** Roll out the red carpet!*

Slang

Pete Lane: Hey bruh! Dab me up!

Jon Thomas: Bruh! What's up! It's been a minute.

PL: I texted you like a gazillion times over break. You ghosting me?

JT: Don't be salty. My mom took my phone. No cap.

PL: That's a little sus, bruh! I see you got some new kicks.

JT: Yeah, pretty dope, huh?

PL: Sick. Respecting that drip.

JT: Are you going to the game after school? It's gonna be lit, bruh!

PL: Finna! There's a bunch of noobs on the other team. We'll crush 'em.

JT: Bet! There'll be some bussin' pizza too.

PL: Yeet! Yeet!

JT: See if Ava's going, bruh. She's got some serious rizz.

PL: Nah. She's been salty. I rickrolled her in math class.

JT: No cap.

Feeling a little confused? I understand. This casual conversation between Pete and Jon is a fairly accurate example of middle school lingo. *Crazy, huh?*

The ever-evolving language of Generation Alpha is impressive. But trust me, it belongs to them. "What you don't finish in class is homework…no cap." *My use of their slang triggers a satisfying display of eye-rolling that spreads across the classroom like a zombie apocalypse.*

Technology

Aside from creating their own exclusive language barrier, Generation Alpha cherishes technology. Maneuvering in the tech

Generation Alpha's Slang Lang Dictionary

bruh - short for brother

dab me up - special handshake

ghosting - ending all communication

salty - bitter behavior

cap - lie

no cap - no lie

sus - short for suspicious

kicks - shoes

dope - cool

sick - extremely impressive or outstanding

respect the drip - show respect for fashion

lit - exciting or excellent

finna - fixing to or going to

noobs- an inexperienced person

bet - okay or I agree

bussin' - really good

Yeet! Yeet! – exclamation of excitement

rizz - charisma or ability to charm

rickroll - playing a trick on someone

world with ease, these kids love their smartphones, social media, and video games. Communicating and interacting with technology is, and has been for some time, what my students generally prefer.

When I announce, "Apples Up," I'm reminding my students for the hundredth time to place their iPads face down on their desks. Today's tech-savvy students were born in an era where technologies advance quicker than I can down my first cup of coffee before the morning bell.

Peer Pressure

Another characteristic of children 11-13 is their relentless desire to fit in with their peers. Acceptance is often a top priority for this age group.

Transitioning from a smaller, mostly stationary setting in elementary to a larger, highly transitional setting in middle school increases social interactions and freedoms.

For several students, before they are even familiar with their new surroundings or expectations, negative peer pressures, lowered self-esteem, and persistent bullying take charge. As if these changes aren't enough, many middle-schoolers are also enduring uncomfortable physical and hormonal changes. Yes, the struggle is real.

While students tussle with new adjustments in their attitude and mindset, their decision-making skills occasionally dwindle.

I have seen students sacrifice their grades, sever long-term friend relationships, and, unfortunately, chuck their moral compass. All because they want to fit in and feel accepted. *But can we blame them? Isn't acceptance what most of us desire?*

Independence

Specifically, one complication I have discovered over the years is that several students in this age group are no longer as eager to please as they were in the elementary setting.

Many factors come into play including attention spans, outside stressors, and classroom materials.

Regardless of the reason, discovering ways to motivate and engage middle school children can be a chore.

Educators, you know what I'm talking about. You spend hours creating the "perfect" lesson. You're feeling proud! You've covered several standards! You're ready to see this lesson in action! But as you scan the room, devoted to your formal assessment, it becomes clear, based on the level of engagement, this lesson will be tossed out the window. It's time to pick your crumpled spirit up off the floor and try again tomorrow.

Understanding my students is crucial.

Understanding leads to meaningful relationships.

Understanding assists me on how to teach, when to teach, when not to teach, and sometimes what to teach.

With understanding, I can engage my students more effectively.

Without understanding, it's difficult to create a positive and supportive learning environment.

Understand?

■ ■ ■ ■ ■ ■

My First Lesson in Gamification

My syllabus was printed and carefully reviewed. My textbook was ordered and in transit. My notebooks were labeled with blank pages waiting to be filled. I was ready!

A few weeks later, my first higher education course, "Technology and Curriculum," was in full swing. As my fellow classmates and I submitted our first assignment, our work was promptly graded. Then our instructor, Dr. Heaton, tossed out a virtual can of worms. Only one. This precious can was awarded to the student who submitted first. No, I did not earn that can of worms, but man, I really wanted it—or the extra point that it represented. *Game over. Lesson one in gamified learning complete!*

Gamification, like the name implies, is the process of adding game-like elements to computer programs or apps but can also be applied to courses of instruction.

These elements provide students with extrinsic rewards in the form of badges, points, or trophies, all intended to increase student motivation and engagement. In some cases, students can choose or create their own animated avatar, controlled by the student within the gamified setting.

Other unique aspects of gamification might include level-up features to stimulate a sense of achievement, leaderboards to create a competitive atmosphere, or artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities to personalize the learning experience.

Throughout Dr. Heaton's online technology course, I experienced several of her gamification elements used to enhance the curriculum. Each achievement was rewarded and celebrated in her class, for she never failed to congratulate our success while encouraging us to play along.

These gamified elements fed my competitive nature. *After earning my first can of worms, triumph high-fived my ego and forced me into a boxing match with the sky!*

Hiding in Plain Sight

Before my technology course, I'd never heard of gamification. Little did I realize that a considerable amount of my free time was being spent on a gamified program, "Duolingo," an educational app designed to help teach new languages.

Duolingo allows students to earn points, collect badges, accumulate gems, and win top spots in various leagues. Students are also rewarded for maintaining a "daily user streak" which measures their of interaction frequency within the program.

Duolingo conditioned me to become fanatical about my daily user streak, a secret obsession that only my dogs knew.

And then I discovered that gamification had been hiding in plain sight the whole time. Embracing the good vibes of Fridays, I decided to graciously insert "Blooket" into the last 15 minutes of my lesson plan.

With just the mention of Blooket, the energy level in the room surges, often disrupting the classroom next door. *"This class is lit!"*

As my students raced to answer questions and earn points, I watched the game's leadership board, projected on my smartTV, maneuver to new positions on the board. *"Awww man!" "Yeet! Yeet!"*

Then, unexpectedly, it hit me. Blooket, an education program I had been implementing for years, uses gamification elements. It successfully merges gaming and learning.

First, I choose a skill, or Blook, for my students to practice. Next, my students choose the game they want to play. Then, ready, set, go! The students compete to earn points and rewards which shifts their leadership status on the board. *And the crowd goes wild! Engagement and motivation. Check!*

Aha!

Not long after learning the educational possibilities of gamification, I reflected on its application for my kids. What purpose can gamification serve in middle school classrooms? How can educators use this modern technology to increase student learning, motivation, and engagement? *This concept could be a game changer! So why not use what we know about student interests to our, and ultimately, their advantage?*

At the beginning of this school year, my place of employment decided to fully pilot a new literacy program, Lexia. The previous program, SuccessMaker, failed to pique my students' interest.

While many students shroud their emotions, often concealing in oversized hoodies, most shamelessly dramatize theirs to protest certain educational technologies. *Assistance needed in room 125! An overflow of pessimism has erupted from another student resulting in a massive puddle of tears on the*

Name : Michelle Ferrell   Subject: English   Grade: 6

Lesson Title: Identifying Genres with Gamification

Actionable Objectives

- Students will be able to categorize types of genres into the correct paper pockets after taking notes on the elements of different genres

- After categorizing each genre, students will be able to identify examples of different genre elements

Day 1 (45 minutes): Whole Class Instruction
- Introduce genres: nonfiction/fiction (biography, historical fiction, fantasy, science fiction)
- Pass out notes and highlight key words/elements
- Show informative video on types of genres
- Watch small movie clips and practice as a whole group identifying genre based on elements

Day 2 (45 minutes): Group Work
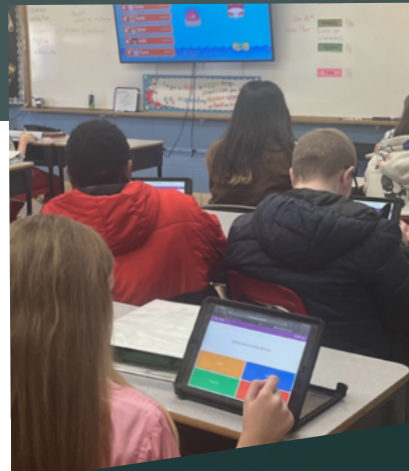
Formal Assessment
- completed sorting
- multiple choice assignment

Informal Assessment
- Observations of group collaboration
- Discussion questions and answers

What worked: High level of engagement and interaction

Improvements for next year: Save paper, have students categorize passages on ipads

Collage of lesson plans
with picture taken by Michelle.

floor! Thanks to you, SuccessMaker!

Programs like Lexia can personalize the learning experience and deliver effective precision education, but they still lack the critical middle-school components: motivation and engagement.

Earlier I said technology appeals to middle school children. They love it! I also know, however, that not every program captures and sustains their attention.

Gamification to the rescue!

Let the Games Begin

Classrooms in the K-12 setting are becoming more diverse. Nevertheless, teachers are still expected to teach all their curriculum standards, identify each child's learning style, modify their teaching practices to align accordingly, and remediate students as required.

Tether these challenges to the burden of overpopulated classes and the plight of the educator is glaring.

Although these expectations are time-consuming and problematic, I believe gamification has the power to enhance motivation and engagement.

Gamification has boosted my foreign language fluency. What's more, I'm seeing it energize and fascinate my middle schoolers. Believe me, this concept is not just compelling, it is convincing.

Educators, it is time to try something new. It is time for us to level up. Ready, set, gamify! >

This article was lightly edited from the original.

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Michelle is an English Language Arts educator for Kanawha County Schools. She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Education and a Master's degree in Educational Leadership. Currently, she is pursuing a Doctoral degree in Curriculum and Instruction at Marshall University. She has worked with middle school students her entire teaching career. Michelle also enjoys raising her three daughters, playing in the dirt (gardening), and spending time outdoors.

Classroom Gamification Tips

Leaderboard Bulletin
Create friendly competition by having students level up

Badges or Charms
Reward assignment completion!

Avatars
Have students create an avatar with a unique alias

Themes
Create new gaming themes for different units!

Be a Team Player
Have students work together to tackle challenges!

Try Gamified Programs
Duolingo   Quizlet
Blooket   Kahoot

set the revisions aside for a week or two, rewrite again, focus on troubling sections, all the while my writing runs in the background while I'm walking or brushing my teeth or sleeping ... I'm recalling a night I was roused by a new idea about how to revise a section I'd been struggling with. Striding through the house faster than I should in the dark, I glimpsed in a shaft of moonlight, the thin profile of my laptop I'd left sitting on the dinner table. I twisted the gooseneck lamp switch, heated a cup of water, belted a blanket around my waist to drape over my bare feet, and pried open the lid.

Rewriting is a joy for me but foreign to most of the graduate students I've taught. Six years ago a student wrote, "I love how we worked on the same paper over the time of the course. You taught me to love my work!" And this was after five cycles of revising.

Weeks before the semester ended, all my students began talking about being published. Once I knew

this, our weekly workshopping discussions kicked up a notch, e.g., Who will be your readers? What additional context will they need to understand you better? Can you reduce or explain the jargon you're using? Share more about your connection with the topic? These and related questions required deeper thinking and multiple revisions.

Two students took me up on my offer to help them look at their papers anew for publication: Michelle on gamification in education (see above) and Jerriann on movies and the underdog archetype (see below).

For the third paper, I asked my teaching assistant, Justin Whittington, to write about his fascination with video gaming. My 14-year-old grandson is fascinated, too. And, wouldn't you know it, after coaching Justin with his paper, I'm feeling inclined to play a video game myself? That would be a huge leap...maybe I'll take a baby step and start by reading about cybertext. —Trish

American Movies and the Underdog Archetype

By Jerriann Cochran

America is ripe with underdog stories since, from its foundation, our country has become a destination and a refuge for countless individuals of marginalized status and Indigenous people who have been pushed into the periphery. Many came of their own free will, others arrived as slaves, indentured servants, or prisoners, and Indigenous people were often forcibly relocated. Countless underdog stories are hidden in these populations and their histories. This paper does not address these, per se, nor all the injustices many have faced. Instead, it attempts to show how the struggles of the country's most influential narrative of the "underdog" has predisposed all of us to an affinity with the underdog archetype.

< Americans are enamored with true stories of underdogs who end up scrabbling to the top. We have a long history of reworking these tales into movies. *McFarland, USA*, *Rudy*, *Miracle*, and *Seabiscuit* are a few examples. Perhaps it is because our young country started as an underdog itself that inspires so many of us to fall in love with the rags-to-riches storyline, or maybe it is the sense of hope we attain from viewing such a film.

The term "Underdog"

The term "underdog" does not have a very appealing origin story. According to Online Etymology Dictionary, underdog means "the beaten dog in a fight," 1887, under + dog (n.). We have come to know the underdog as the contestant who begins an event with high odds compared to the competition.

Grammarist.com explains "that it is a particularly American trait to root for the underdog." While the term is synonymous with sporting jargon, an underdog can be anyone who is placed in an unfavorable position, be it sports, politics, business, or personal success. It could be financial, educational, emotional, or any insufficiency compared to their opponent.

America's Underdog Origins

America itself started as the ultimate underdog. Colonists faced severe deprivations when trying to survive in a country of which they had no relevant knowledge. They came without the proper supplies,

had no real shelter against the harsh weather, and were outnumbered by the Indigenous people. Despite all the setbacks and hardships, they not only survived but became formidable colonies. Compared to the great military power of England, the thirteen colonies were underfunded and disorganized. The chances of winning a war against the greatest military power in the world were slim. Though the colonies were the underdog, they still won the Revolutionary War.

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A generation later, during the War of 1812, The Battle of New Orleans solidified America as the underdog who could not lose. British forces had given American troops several losses and the city of New Orleans was its next target. The British Army, led by Lt. General Sir Edward Michael Pakenham, consisted of 60 ships in the Gulf of Mexico and

Jerriann Cochran has taught for 15 years and currently teaches eighth-grade English Language Arts at Blackman Middle School in Murfreesboro, Tennessee. She completed her Ed.S. in December 2023 through Marshall University and recently became a doctoral candidate in Curriculum and Instruction at Marshall. She is researching the changes in discipline trends post-COVID-19.

around 10,000 men. The Americans, led by Major General Andrew Jackson, totaled approximately 5,000, with 1,500 regular militia and additional volunteers.

Author, book editor, and reviewer, Johnathan Yardley, in his 1999 Washington Post article, "The End of the American Underdog," explains the British looked down on the Americans. Their overconfidence and America's determination ended in a demoralizing loss to the British with 2,037 casualties compared to 333 American. Nadav Goldschmied, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Psychology at San Diego University makes clear this start to our nation instilled in us a love for the underdog that has been reinforced

by our capitalism, allowing individuals to move up both socially and economically. It is the myth of the American dream, that anyone can be successful with hard work and determination, which keeps the underdog archetype an American icon in Hollywood.

The Psychology of the Underdog

In literature and film, the underdog archetype is a subcategory of the common hero archetype. Goldschmied explains the common hero can have an inner struggle they must overcome, but the underdog's struggle is always external since it is against an opponent or an establishment.

The main difference between a hero and an underdog is that the underdog is likely to fail. The underdog must battle against those who have more power and resources than they possess but are alike in other characteristics.

The American dream and the underdog go together as both declare that despite everything, you can create a better life for yourself and your family. Being an underdog even has an upside. According to studies done by Samir Nurmohamed, Associate Professor of Management at the University of Pennsylvania, individuals who consider themselves to be underdogs perform better than their colleagues. "Opposed to having greater self-confidence or being more assertive, the desire to prove others wrong was what explained why those experiencing underdog expectations performed better."

In his 2007 doctoral thesis, Goldschmied proved the underdog phenomenon was consistent in both sports and politics. In the 2004 Olympics, participants in a study conducted by Goldschmied were provided with medal counts from past competitions. The medal counts were used to make predictions of athletes' performance. Participants were asked to cheer and support swimmers based on the medal counts from each country. The study revealed that athletes from countries with fewer medals received a much higher rate of support from the participants of the

study. This phenomenon also happens in politics. When study participants were given results from fake polls, the candidate with the lower predicted votes gained more support, even across partisan lines. The underdog phenomenon has become a part of us. Goldschmied concluded that "In both sports and politics, all parties seem reluctant to hold the label of frontrunner, and willing or even happy to embrace the label of underdog."

> **The common hero can have an inner struggle they must overcome, but the underdog's struggle is always external since it is against an opponent or an establishment.**

We root for the underdog even though it would be more beneficial for us to side with the competition. This contradicts the social identity theory in psychology established in 1979 by social psychologists, Henri Tajfel and John Turner, who introduced the concept as a way to explain "intergroup behavior." Their theory touts that we get our self-concept, sense of belonging, and pride from being a part of social groups, like a specific social class or being fans of a certain team.

> **Even more noteworthy for adult moviegoers are movies that are based on true stories of underdogs who have overcome great odds. I believe these movies are notable because they are also inspirational.**

Research completed in 2017 at the University of San Diego by Goldschmied and his students, Jessica Ruiz, fourth-year McNair Scholar, and graduate student Sydney Olagaray proved that we want the underdog to prevail to the extent we will have false memories of them winning when in fact they

did not. In their study, participants were asked to recall the winner in *The Cinderella Man* and *Rocky I* movies. In *The Cinderella Man,* the underdog won the final fight of the movie. In the study, 81% of the participants correctly identified the outcome, which is exceptional compared to results for the *Rocky I* movie in which Rocky Balboa loses the final fight. In the study, however, only 42% correctly recalled this outcome.

The Underdog in Film

Filmmakers have capitalized on the underdog phenomenon to draw people to the theater ever since Charlie Chaplin's 1914 silent film, *Making a Living*. Many of the underdog movies that have been made are fiction and no company understands more about the appeal of the underdog than Walt Disney. In Disney's 2021 animated movie, *Encanto,* young Mirabel is the underdog as she must save her family's magical house. All her family has magical gifts except her and since she must perform this task without a gift, she fits the archetype.

The 2003 film, *Finding Nemo,* is another notable example. Nemo, a small clown fish with a deformed fin, goes missing in the open sea filled with dangerous creatures and his "overprotective" dad goes hunting for him. Both son and dad are reunited and become heroes despite their limitations.

One of the most well-known of the Disney underdogs is the original animated version of Cinderella from 1950. Her stepsisters have the money and titles of aristocracy, but despite being poor, mistreated, and forced to work as the family's housekeeper, Cinderella wins the love of the handsome prince.

Films Based on Real Underdogs

Even more noteworthy for adult moviegoers are movies that are based on true stories of underdogs. I believe these movies are notable because they are also inspirational. These are not animated, fictional characters that are subjects of a storyteller, but tales of real people who underwent real struggles.

For example, the 2015 film, *McFarland, USA* mentioned earlier, is about a small high school cross-

country team. The runners are mostly children of immigrant farm workers required to go out early before school to work in the fields. They not only put in longer days than the runners on the other teams, but they also do not have the financial resources for proper shoes and uniforms. Yet despite these limitations, they end up qualifying for the state competition.

Rudy (1993), is based on the true story of Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger. Rudy was from a small town where everyone went to work at the mill after high school. Rudy had a dream of playing college football for Notre Dame but was not strong in academics or hulking in stature. In fact, he barely made the grade point average to qualify and was small compared to the other football players. But with determination and faith, Rudy ends up on the field in the final game of the season with the crowd chanting his name.

Miracle (2004), is based on the true story of the 1980 US Olympic Hockey team. The Russian team was the favorite for a gold medal. The US team had less experience and had not played together for as long. Russia had the world's top-ranked players and had won the gold medal in five out of the six previous Winter Games. Russia had a team of seasoned professionals, and the US team was composed of amateur players. Despite these odds, the US won the gold medal in an upset. I was 12 when this happened, and I remember watching the game on TV. I knew nothing about hockey. Aware of the anti-Russian sentiment of the Cold War and as a child of a military family, I was glued to the live broadcast. It wasn't only about the game or the politics; it was about America being the underdog and fighting to win against the "big, bad," Russians. My brother and I jumped up and down for joy when the US scored the winning goal. The underdog beat the giant!

One of the best underdog movies created is based on a true story. Author Laura Hillenbrand wrote the award-winning book, *Seabiscuit*, that was subsequently developed into the 2003 movie written and directed by Gary Ross. The movie tells of the improbable success of personable owner, Charles Howard; the quirky trainer, Tom Smith; oversized jockey, Red Pollard; and scrappy racehorse, Seabiscuit. Taking place during the Great Depression era of the 1930s, it is the perfect context for an American underdog story. It is a variation of the underdog archetype because none of the individuals could have achieved their best without the others. The hero needs a helper and while each character is an

With four underdogs to root for, *Seabiscuit* is an exceptional example of the archetype that Americans are hardwired to appreciate, internalize, and adore.

underdog in their own way, they all require the help of each other.

The successful automobile magnate, Charles Howard must overcome disasters that include the accidental death of his son, the dissolution of his marriage, and the crippling business setback of the crash of 1929. The trainer, Tom Smith, is at his lowest point and lives in a tent in Mexico after financial hardships caused the Wild West show he worked in to fold. These two individuals meet and begin the journey to find a racehorse and a jockey.

The jockey they find, Red Pollard, went from owning a horse as a boy in an upper-class family to working in the stables during the Depression. The horse, Seabiscuit, is the jockey's kindred spirit in the form of a beaten-down racehorse. Both have been abandoned, Red by his parents who recognize his gift with horses and think he will be better off on his own, and Seabiscuit by his owners who have decided he is a stubborn, lazy, horse that eats too much and should be killed.

Vacationing in Mexico, Howard buys Seabiscuit. He sees something in both the horse and the jockey, Pollard, who has been racing him in Tijuana. Pollard and the trainer, Smith, help Seabiscuit discover his drive and rediscover what it means to be a racing horse. Howard helps Pollard and Smith by providing them with funds, a place to stay, and a horse to train. Smith, Pollard, and Seabiscuit all help Howard climb out of the grief of the loss of his son and regain a lust for life. Not one of them could have attained success without the others. Together they overcame obstacles — the horse with a drive to win, a jockey with more wins, an owner with more money, and a trainer with more experience. In 1938, they won the Race of the Century against War Admiral at Pimlico Race Course in Baltimore with over 40,000 people in attendance. More importantly, they had won America's hearts. With four underdogs to root for, *Seabiscuit* is an exceptional example of the archetype that Americans are hardwired to appreciate, internalize, and adore.

Eighty years after the race, in November, 2018, Baltimore Magazine, reporter Christine Jackson wrote, "The Pimlico Special endures not only as one of the ultimate examples of greatness found in the unlikeliest of places, but as a moment of joy and unity amidst dark days. The kind that it's hard to imagine anymore. In the midst of the Depression and in a world careening toward war, people stopped and listened, and then they cheered."

The Underdog Inside Us

The American Dream, that if you work hard and persevere you can overcome any obstacle, helps us appreciate when a true underdog story presents itself. We entertain our children with these stories from an early age with fiction and fairy tales. Hollywood has capitalized on this, immortalizing these stories in film. We sympathize with the underdog and root for them to the extent of choosing them over a political party, like the "dark horse" Jimmy Carter in 1976 and Ronald Reagan in 1980. These fiction and nonfiction movies ensure the underdog story remains embedded in American culture. >

(Lightly edited for publication.)

Why Game Studies?
by Justin Whittington

Justin Whittington will be graduating this semester from our program with an MA in Humanities (Cultural Studies & Arts and Society) and moving on to the Texts and Technology doctoral program at the University of Central Florida in Orlando. His research focus is on political happenings in pop culture—specifically games and theme parks. He confesses to being open to the occasional deviation of personal interest. He's also a graduate assistant at the H.E.L.P. Program, where he tutors students with specific learning disabilities and ADHD. When he's not gaming or at Disney World (collecting data, he swears), his two cats, Artemis (left) and Andromeda demand the entirety of his attention.

Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace by Janet H. Murray (1997)

< In the course of introductions, there lies the dreaded question: "So what do you do for a living?" Some take this as an opportunity to self-promote and network, while others quietly slink away into a corner. I'll admit, initially following my career change into academia, I joined the latter under the careerist ladder.

With practice, I've begun to feel pride pronouncing that I'm a graduate student with my eyes on a full scholarly path. What do you study, they ask? Why, games and theme parks, I say! Cue the skepticism.

Let me justify myself. I'll keep it

Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature by Espen J. Aarseth (1997)

to video games, which informs my interest in theme parks.

Game studies—sometimes called *ludology*, from Latin lūdō "to play"—is an interdisciplinary endeavor, much like our Graduate Humanities Program.

In 1997, two books were published that started it all for game studies: *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* by Janet H. Murray, and *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* by Espen J. Aarseth.

Claiming to turn twenty-seven this year, game studies is a loose linkage of scholars fascinated with games and play across the gaming spectrum. An unfortunate side effect of the rise of technology has been an overemphasis on video games, but I assure you, we also care about board games, sports, and even the playground. After all, where would we be without Risk (a favorite of mine) and Monopoly, Baseball and Soccer, Four Square and Tag?

Here's the kicker. As famed transdisciplinarian Brian Sutton-Smith observed over five decades ago, games and play had been relegated to the back-burner of serious study. Author, game scholar and designer Mary Flanagan in her 2009 book, *Critical Play: Radical Game*
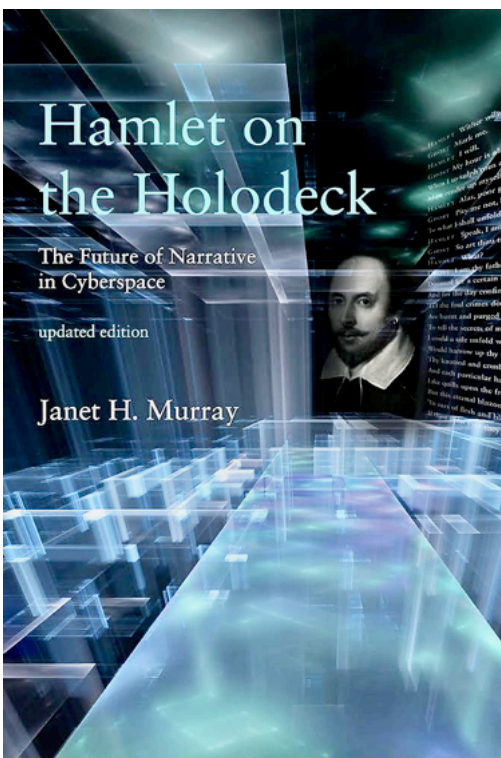
Design, identified the source of this neglect as the creation of a social category called "childhood" in the 1600s, further cemented by the "rational" Age of Enlightenment in the 17–1800s and the Industrial Revolution in the 18–1900s. All three minimized leisurely habits. These habits, however, remained in play.

In 2020, market research firm Nielsen "found 82% of global consumers played and watched video game content during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns." This wasn't only with the youth; in 2021, business magazine Forbes "saw a 200%

increase in the number of people aged over 60 searching for games."

A 2023 study by Bojan Jovanovic, "Gamer Demographics: Facts And Stats About the Most Popular Hobby in the World," published by DataProt, suggest the average "gamer" is now 35 years old and around half are women. Using those earlier statistics from DataProt, I found that women gamers over the age of 30 outnumber gaming men aged 18–24 by a factor of 11-to-1. To drive the point home, Megan Condis and Marshall University's very own Dr. Jess Morrisette, co-authors of "Dudes, Boobs, and GameCubes: Video Game

Advertising Enters Adolescence," argue the stereotypical gamer was a byproduct of games marketing starting in the late 1990s.

Think about these key cultural institutions: sports, television, social media. Studying these is widely done. With the rising play of video games, one might expect a similar drive to understand what makes them unique.

And here's what happened in a similar situation: theme park researchers shifted from studying pure amusement that world fairs, electric/trolley parks, and such provided, to analyzing how integrating themes elevated amusement to a sense of immersion. It's like the difference between riding a generic rollercoaster and riding a rollercoaster that has animatronics and movie music playing, taking you to another world. Disney parks were the first to popularize this and Universal and others have emulated it in recent decades.

We tend to miss things when we position ourselves as higher on the totem pole. I wasn't around for it, but I recall reading about the ivory tower's treatment of film and television as "low culture." We don't now consider their study to be that unusual.

Disney's media empire extends into this space via collaboration on a game series called *Kingdom Hearts* where players explore the various franchises in a unifying world.

Second Life, a user-created virtual world, unaffiliated with Disney, features replicas of its theme parks made by admiring fans.

Screenshot by Justin of Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda™: Tears of the Kingdom.* *Tears of the Kingdom* is a recent sequel to *The Legend of Zelda™: Breath of the Wild,* which prompted in me such thought and caused me to pause the game to take notes. (See Rachael Hutchinson's essay, "Observant Play: Colonial Ideology in The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild.")

But this doesn't change many folks from assuming I design games or simply want an excuse to play them all day. I do some design work, but it's not my primary focus nor is it for necessary publication or profit; it's just assumed to be good practice to understand games from multiple angles. Much like how an artist may benefit from, well, making art. My undergraduate interest in linguistics also reminds me of constantly being asked how many languages I spoke. Is it fair to assume psychologists can read minds?

As for playing games, Jaakko Stenros, in his book chapter, "Guided by Transgression: Defying Norms as an Integral Part of Play," crafted a term "instrumentalized play," for how dreadful the act of playing a game in the course of research can be: "Finally, there is play devoid of playfulness—*instrumentalized play* in the service of external goals. [It] includes . . . playing as research for game scholars . . . transgress[ing] the idea that play is purposeless."

I've actually had to shut a game off that had research value—I thought it'd be easy to study it and play at the same time but it was difficult in an environment more conducive to fun than research. I returned to it later with a mindset of "I've got to make this work and pull the lesson/data/etc. I need."

I'd be lying, however, if I left out how my mind often wanders to deeper inquiry in the middle of recreational play. A perfect example is my pondering of the postcolonial politics of Nintendo's *The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom* (2024) last summer during my first play through, something that's puzzled other players when I've bought it up to them. On those occasions, I must make the difficult decision to pause and take notes. Tell me, how fun does that sound?

Considering all of the above, I insist my confidence has increased. Justifying my interests has become merely sharing them. For that, I thank the positive reception of conversations with curious outsiders. And I must acknowledge that I stand on the shoulders of game scholar giants before me. >

(Lightly edited for publication.)

You can follow or contact Justin at https://jmlwhittington.com/.

Cat Pleska: Faculty, Author, Editor, Publisher, Storyteller, and <u>now</u> Script Writer & Narrator of "Vernon Street: The Corbin Story"

Cat's essays published in 2022

"DRIVE!" was published in the Women of Appalachia Project Women Speak Anthology Vol. VIII published by Sheila-Na-Gig;

"At the Atlantic," written as a flash essay, is a Ekphrastic piece responding to a Skate egg casing.

"Where Fish Dream" was accepted for the Barbara Kingsolver edition of Appalachian Anthology of Writers (Shepherd University).

Summer & Fall
2024 SCHEDULES
Upcoming Seminars

"Vernon Street: The Corbin Story"
(https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=vernon+street%3A+corbin+}

< In 1957, Nathan Corbin, founder of Corbin LTD. moved his Brooklyn-based garment factory to Westmoreland, West Virginia, in Wayne County (now part of Huntington). Nathan was a native of eastern Russia, born in 1890. He immigrated to the US, specifically to the garment district in NY, and apprenticed with a tailor. Eventually, he opened his own business making men's trousers, and his business boomed. But crime syndicates and challenging unions proved to be too much, and Nathan and his sons, Howard and Lee, opened their business in a 96,000 square foot, abandoned building on 1040 Vernon Street. The economic boon it afforded Huntington and Wayne County brought an almost immediate impact. Nathan needed dozens and then hundreds of women to operate his factory and they showed up, pleased to sew for good living wages to support themselves and their families.

The factory closed down in 2003, mostly due to rising materials cost, outsourcing labor, falling product quality, and the general decline in industry country-wide. The women of Huntington and surrounding areas had thrived for decades at Corbin, but even good things must end. The building on Vernon Street became abandoned again and in 2010, Brandon Dennison purchased it and formed Coalfield Development, a now well-established business incubation operation to benefit workers from southern West Virginia. He refurbished the old Corbin Factory and today it flourishes providing good working conditions and pay once again for its workers.

This documentary is to showcase and honor the Corbin workers who made a "good living" for a few decades on Vernon Street. >