**The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions: On Technology, Games-Based Learning, and Erasure**

My mother has taught third graders for 20 years in an “extreme poverty conditions” low-income school in Texas that is seated within a wealthier-than-average school district. Her experiences as a teacher, team leader, and mentor for new teachers in her school have left her and those around her with the distinct feeling that their intuition and embodied experiences are not valued. Instead, a constant, district-wide push towards technologization and game-based pedagogy within classrooms have left my mother and her peers rudderless.  She got me a job working in technology support for her school while I completed my undergraduate degree.

I spent over 3 years supporting the technology that, below, I argue we should be more thoughtful about before using. I had a direct hand in the unthoughtful creation and implementation of that technology. I still feel deeply responsible for the problems it has caused. It is time that we have a frank discussion about the role of technology in the classroom and the push to turn pedagogy into a model that emulates and values gamic learning models over any other.

Education scholars who have turned to videogames to attempt to solve all the problems of modern education predicate their work on an assumed heterosexual, white, male, able-bodied, middle-to-upper-middle-class student who is actively engaged in their own learning and has the support infrastructure in place to eliminate precarity and uncertainty from developmental learning. How can I make such an audacious claim? By virtue of what material my mother’s continuing education requirements have her reading still to this day, and what professional development I sat through that espoused the same uncritical values with the same handful of citations, repeated *ad nauseum*. I attended numerous professional development meetings each year regarding strategies of increased technologization in the classroom, and why it’s critical to student engagement and success that those technologies be actively used by all teachers.

My mother’s professional development experiences are similar: She has repeatedly heard that rote learning (worksheets, flash drills, etc) is oppressive to students and, instead, games-based learning is now the preferred pedagogical approach to teaching in this district, according to “specialists”. The scholars that our district uses to base their claims on are scholars like [Jane](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Reality_Is_Broken/yiOtN_kDJZgC) [McGonigal](https://www.avantgame.com/MCGONIGAL%20A%20Real%20Little%20Game%20DiGRA%202003.pdf), [Constance](https://doi.org/10.1002/jaal.455) [Steinkuehler](https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412006290440), [James](https://www.google.com/books/edition/What_Video_Games_Have_to_Teach_Us_About/uirTBAAAQBAJ) [Gee](http://www.tcrecord.org/library/content.asp?contentid=22062), [Greg](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Game_Believes_in_You/ojmdBAAAQBAJ) [Toppo](https://search.proquest.com/docview/1768942912?pq-origsite=summon), [Kurt](https://web.archive.org/web/20130601164654/https:/website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/tenure-files/39-squire-IJIS.pdf) [Squire](https://web.archive.org/web/20110720115535/http:/website.education.wisc.edu/kdsquire/tenure-files/12-macarthur-book-salen-squire.pdf), [Guzman and Nussbaum](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2009.00322.x), [Charles Kilfoye](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23611702), and [Lee Sheldon](https://www.google.com/books/edition/The_Multiplayer_Classroom/qgO-bwAACAAJ). Each part of each scholars’ name links to at least one piece they’ve written about technology [games-based or otherwise] in classrooms, and does little to critically engage with who is benefited by these technologies and game-based pedagogies and who is erased. For instance, a common theme emerging from McGonigal, Gee, and Steinkuehler is that lived, embodied experiences are not enough to learn by (see: McGonigal's *Reality is Broken* for a truly audacious reading of ‘lived experiences’). Instead, they argue, videogames, game-based learning, and technologized learning are the only valid ways of learning due to an increasingly interconnected and technologized global economy.

Lee Skallerup Bessette, in “[It’s Time to Play: Games, Gamification, and Active Learning](https://hybridpedagogy.org/its-time-to-play-games-gamification-and-active-learning/),” brings up important questions of play in the learning process. She examines how and why technology is on the uptick in university classrooms and how the drive of technologizing classrooms is untenable for adjunct faculty that often teach across multiple universities and are expected to keep abreast of multiple forms of technology. She also conceives of games-based learning in classrooms as an inherently positive technology that allows for introspection and self-reflection at worst, spaces of play where exploration leads to critical engagement with a subject matter at best.

I want to push back on the importance of play as a space of exploration and how games can lead to introspection and self-reflection and recontextualize the teaching bodies we’re examining. I believe that, in a college/university setting, her argument may be true to some extent. But within a K-12 classroom setting like the ones that the list of scholars in the paragraph above are excluding, like the one my mother works in, and like the classrooms whose technology I supported, these can quickly become untenable goals that end up with implicit value placed on outside-of-the-classroom support structures that all students may not have access to, coupled with the assumption that students have the technological and gamic competencies to leverage within the classroom. Attention must be paid to the granularity of classrooms and learners so that appropriate interventions can be leveraged to truly include *all* students. The uncritical buy-in from administration to the idea of technology and games as a cure-all for all things that need to be cured distracts from questions of basic economic, social, and emotional inequity that plague public education.

**Promises of a “Better Future”**

The overarching theme of my time as a technology support specialist was that the mere presence of technology in a classroom overtook usability *and* users. Our superintendent was often photographed posing with some new piece of classroom technology (Xbox Kinects, SmartBoards, Document Cams, COWS [Computers on Wheels]) in one of the upper-middle-class schools of the district. Teachers had to constantly change their lesson plans to try and utilize technology that was often more clunky and invasive than helpful. The constant pressure by the superintendent that every teacher use every technology, and what’s more, be *evaluated* on using it was crippling; *continues* to be crippling.

The first piece of technology that I was trained to support were SmartBoards. The SmartBoard has the ability to function as a replacement for an overhead projector, a companion to a computer, and a tool for interactive, group-and-game-based classroom tactile and kinetic learning. SMART Technologies, a prominent manufacturer of smartboards, [presents a very one-sided view](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0U05WeXPGlk&ab_channel=SMARTTechnologies) of how the technology is seamless, easy to use, well supported by the company, and most of all: interactive and engaging.

The school board introduced a bond to purchase these boards in April of 2010, the bond was approved in May, the boards were purchased in June, and delivered in July. District-wide, all technology support workers had one day-long session where we played with the boards and then teachers received one half-day of training before the start of the school year on the SmartBoards; my colleague and I wrote a short introduction to what the boards are, what they did, why they are better than traditional whiteboards, and why use of the boards is mandatory. Something I wrote that will haunt me forever: “Smartboards will teach students how to critically engage with other forms of technology, allowing them to develop useful technology industry skills and be productive members of society.” I drank the kool-aid, so to speak, that Christo Sims talks about in [*Disruptive Fixation*](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Disruptive_Fixation/LA9pDQAAQBAJ) when discussing the New School in NYC’s goal of using industry partnerships to create a new class of worker with digital and technological flexibility. I believed that an introduction to something technical, tactile, and ‘fun’ like a smartboard would be the key to creating “productive” members of society: or, as Dyer-Witheford called it in [*Cyber-Proletariat*](https://www.google.com/books/edition/Cyber_Proletariat/WEw9CwAAQBAJ), a new caste of exploitable worker with digital competencies and learning capabilities that can easily pick up new technologies.

We went over how to change colors of pens, how to use the desktop and pull programs up, and how to drag pictures from the desktop to the top layer of whatever you were working on. This is all *we* were trained to do with the boards, and in rewatching the video I linked above, I couldn’t tell you how to do 80% of what those teachers did. When we pointed out that there were missing functionalities linked to proprietary support programs like the ones in the video above, a superior informed us that the package the district chose did not include lesson-plans, study aids, etc. from the company itself, and that the district would be working on its own content. That content was not delivered in the three years I was employed for the district.

With the implementation of these boards, a memo was sent out from the superintendent’s office extolling the values of technologizing the lesson-making and lesson-delivery process with these boards and how important multimodal and technologized lesson delivery was to the success of the district. The memo also mentioned that use of technology would now be graded criteria in teacher evaluations.

I realize now what an inordinate amount of pressure this one example of technologization put on a vast range of teachers and students: my mother, whose pedagogy had, to that point, been facilitated on whiteboards and never “went down” due to technological malfunctions; young teachers that she peer mentored that didn’t learn in college how to implement technology into lesson plans; students who lost out on instructional time due to technological malfunction; students who did not have the technological competencies that were expected of them to succeed with these technologies. This was but one example from my time working in this district where technology was rushed, no support was given to the support staff, then the technology was pushed onto the teachers with less training than we received.

**If You Die in the Game, You Die for Real**

In addition to over-technologization, the district began pushing games-based pedagogy harder and harder, making the case that technology and games are logical compliments, and that learners in today’s classrooms have fundamentally different learning styles than learners 20 years ago. Therefore, games-based pedagogy made sense to them because current students tend to spend more time with videogames and on screens of some sort than learners did 20 years ago. What doesn’t make sense is to assume every student in the district has the same technological proficiency or access to technology. Technological proficiency and skill sets vary *vastly* from the higher-end socioeconomic schools in this district to the lower socioeconomic schools like the one I worked for; students may or may not have access to iPads, game consoles, or home computers that games-based pedagogy mimics and tries to recreate in the classroom.

In the district I worked for, I was asked by the superintendent’s office to make a games-based asset for 6th grade science classrooms to use as an introductory module to the rain cycle. The specifications were that it should be interactive, utilize the SmartBoard as the delivery method, possibly themed after Jeopardy, and should allow students to have real-time feedback in terms of a win/loss state; if they answer a question correctly, they ‘win’ and continue to the next question, and if they don’t, they ‘lose’ and another student comes up and starts the game over. I made this asset, it was signed off on, and it was released district-wide. What was not communicated to me was that this asset would be used as an assessment tool for students’ progress leading up to Texas’ standardized test, [STAAR](https://texasassessment.com/families/all-about-the-staar-test/).

There are a few considerations that must be made when examining this situation: First, why is a game being used to introduce material but also assess students on what they’ve learned when there has been no formal instruction on the subject in question? Second, why is a games-based pedagogical model being used to assess student success regarding a standardized test that is *not* games-based? Third, which students in these classrooms had the technological proficiencies to successfully complete these games, or to possibly game the game by guessing the answers correctly based on experience they’ve had with similar games on, say, the Wii? When I raised some of these questions with the superintendent’s office, they said that “[This district] prides itself on being a place where *all* students are active learners and where technology aids all classrooms and teachers in achieving that goal.” The district’s vague, patronizing boilerplate only works to highlight the complete disconnect between teachers operating in the classroom and administration who are relentless in pushing technologization within the classroom, regardless of who inhabits that space.

**In the End, Does it Even Matter?**

The examples above are granular examples of the wider problematic implementation of technology in classrooms and a push for games-based pedagogy that I’ve experienced. These systems privilege certain learners over others both through how the district forces pedagogical styles on teachers and by forcing teachers to use technology that may be against the teachers’ better judgements

I hope this work will start a conversation about how we, as educators, can start thinking through granular approaches to classroom technologization that privilege *all* of our learners over totalizing approaches that only favor some learners. Sometimes that means *not* using technology, or pushing back on using technology that does not align with the pedagogical practices that we, as classroom instructors, know will better suit the learners we are instructing.

What I am calling for is a critical reexamination of how, why, and where technology and games-based learning is implemented in classroom settings and how it erases certain learners. I am calling for future theoretical and practical work that decenters white, normative, upper-middle class bodies as the assumed-standard bodies in classrooms, and for scholarship that decenters white, normative, upper-middle class scholars as preeminent in the field of games-based pedagogy. Instead, future work should approach pedagogy, technology, and games-based learning from an intersectional paradigm in which teachers who are in the classroom every day with their students of varying socioeconomic status and of varying technological proficiencies and outside-of-school support-networks are given the autonomy to decide how best to teach their classes.