



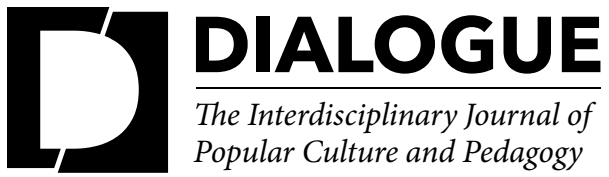
DIALOGUE

*The Interdisciplinary Journal of
Popular Culture and Pedagogy*



Evolving Awareness in Popular Culture and Pedagogy

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy
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INTRODUCTION AND SCOPE

Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy is an open-access, peer-reviewed journal focused on the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy. *Dialogue* is committed to creating and maintaining a scholarly journal accessible to all—meaning that there is no charge for either the author or the reader.

The Journal is interested in contributions offering theoretical, practical, pedagogical, and historical examinations of popular culture, including interdisciplinary discussions and those which examine the connections between American and international cultures. In addition to analyses provided by contributed articles, the Journal also encourages submissions for guest editions, interviews, and reviews of books, films, conferences, music, and technology.

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Anna CohenMiller is an innovative pedagogue and researcher who addresses methodologist systematic issues of equity and inclusion in education. She has a long-standing interest in the intersection of popular culture and pedagogy, in particular, related to how young audiences learn informally from media representations. As an international specialist, Dr. CohenMiller has spent the past six years in Kazakhstan leading research and initiatives to facilitate success for all students (e.g., in online learning environments, for mothers in academia, for students with varied learning needs). She received her PhD in *Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching* and MA in *Bicultural-Bilingual Studies* from the University of Texas at San Antonio. Since 2011, she has been involved with SWPACA in developing *Dialogue* and then as an Executive Team member. Dr. CohenMiller is one of the founding faculty of the Graduate School of Education at Nazarbayev University, the Co-Founding Director of The Consortium of Gender Scholars (www.gen-con.org), Founder of The Motherscholar Project (www.motherscholar.org), and founding member of the Higher Ed Learning Collective. Her contributions can regularly be seen in popular outlets such as InsideHigherEd, [Medium.com](https://medium.com), as well as in various international research and educational journals. Dr. CohenMiller's forthcoming book, *Questions in Qualitative Research for Multicultural Contexts*, will be out with Routledge in Fall 2021

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Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy
Volume 8, Issue 1 | February 2021 | www.journaldialogue.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Editorial

Evolving Awareness of Popular Culture and Pedagogy: A View into Celebrity, Song, Narrative, and Superheroes
Miriam Sciala and Anna S. CohenMiller

Articles

The Power of Cool: Celebrity Influence in Higher Education
Jena Hawk

Society Doesn't Owe You Anything: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas & Video Games as Speculative Fiction
Marc A. Ouellette

The Many Ways of Wakanda: Viewpoint Diversity in Black Panther and Its Implications for Civics Education
Justin Frank Martin

Guiding Students Down that "Old Town Road:" Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch
Lynn Zimmerman

Evolving Awareness of Popular Culture and Pedagogy: A View into Celebrity, Song, Narrative, and Superheroes

As we enter 2021, we can see the evolving nature of popular culture and pedagogy emerging during times of social distancing. For instance, the SWPACA conference is being held virtually, for the first time in its 42 year history. In this issue of *Dialogue: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Popular Culture and Pedagogy*, we have an opportunity to look across articles linking the way we think about our world through the lenses of popular culture and pedagogy.

Using insights from a range of popular culture topics—song lyrics, the narrative behind video games, superhero story plots, and celebrity speakers—the articles provide readers with ways to think about learning. For those of us who are educators, we have the opportunity to consider informal and formal learning through popular culture. Across these works, the authors speak to questions such as what is the impact of celebrity speakers? How can we make sense of a “dystopic” present? How might superheroes help us to understand civics? And how can we make learning interesting?

In the first of the articles, we hear from Jena L. Hawk’s in *The Power of Cool: Celebrity Influence in the Ivory Tower*. In the text, she traces the development of trends underlying commencement speeches such as that of the initial emphasis on inspirational wisdom-filled lectures by a politician or a graduating star student to a move towards speeches delivered by celebrity speakers. Hawk discusses how this latter approach can serve the educational establishment by providing a means to promote itself and enhance its competitiveness, yet can also pose problems. Setting her essay within the framework provided by parasocial interaction theory, Hawk argues that this practice can be detrimental to the sense of identity of the public attending the graduation ceremony, and more worryingly, to members of the graduating class the celebrity is addressing.

The ways we are affected by what we see and hear can be linked as well to other forms of cultural input, such as through gaming. In the second article in the issue, we hear from Marc Ouellette, in his article, *Society Doesn’t Owe You Anything: Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas and Video Games as Speculative Fiction*. Here, Ouellette likens dystopian literature like Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, for example, and video games like *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* to a type of speculative fiction in whose world issues from our current world are reflected, created, and predicted. More specifically, the tilt towards right-wing extremism that has been amplified in the U.S. during the Trump administration is reflected in *GTA: San Andreas*’ alternative world. Yet a key difference between dystopic literature and video games is the interactive nature of video games, which Ouellette argues acts as a means to mitigate issues faced in a dystopic world and offers a potential for developing solutions.

As we move into the third article, we can consider the influence of the superhero as a cultural icon and its potential for pedagogy. In *The Many Ways of Wakanda: Viewpoint Diversity in Black Panther and Its Implications for Civics Education*, Justin Frank Martin demonstrates the possibilities of embedding popular fiction in the form of superhero films in primary school civics classrooms by highlighting key events

presented in the 2018 film *Black Panther*. Hence, using the responsibilities of T'Challa the main character and superhero of *Black Panther* offers ways to consider issues of fairness, justice, and consequence. Martin formulates his explanation within the framework of social domain theory and draws a connection between the concepts embedded therein and the understanding children are believed to have of the world they live in. By highlighting the situations appearing in the film as well as students' own behaviours that represent aspects of the theory, Martin points to ways these can be used to develop students' ability to analyze and comprehend behaviours and situations, and thus bring about a better understanding of their own social worlds. Martin provides a possible pedagogical plan for approaches which could be integrated into teaching methodology.

The final article of this issue addresses eliciting freshman students' media literacy to enhance engagement in first-year writing classes. In *Guiding Students Down that "Old Town Road: Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch,"* Lynn D. Zimmerman addresses how many students, upon entering colleges and universities, may view writing classes as a burden, academic writing as foreign, and the subjects therein as unrelatable. Yet, for Zimmerman, this can be averted by incorporating topical and even controversial issues as demonstrated in social media feeds as a way to encourage discussion and debate. The author demonstrates how bringing these topics into the classroom can guide students away from a tendency to unquestioningly accept one point of view. Instead, she explains how an examination of lyrics such as in the rap-country song, "Old Town Road" by Lil Nas X, can lead students towards being better able to evaluate, comprehend and explain different perspectives.

In the end, these four articles showcase the importance of adapting to and evolving with themes across popular culture to better understand students and ourselves. Just as the issue addresses an *evolving* state, so too is *Dialogue* evolving and adjusting to the needs of the community. We welcome Miriam Sciala as Interim Managing Editor and thank Kirk Peterson for his work. Also, we have brought to the team, Joseph Yap, as our new Reference Editor, who joins with Copy Editors, Rheanne Anderson and Robert Gordyn. Lastly, thank you to our Creative Director, Douglas CohenMiller and our robust set of peer reviewers. The entire team has moved through challenging times and we thank you all for your coordinated efforts and commitment to *Dialogue* and are pleased to share these works in *Evolving Awareness in Popular Culture and Pedagogy*.

Miriam Sciala

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The Power of Cool: Celebrity Influence in the Ivory Tower

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ABSTRACT

Since the earliest of times, student orations and student debates served as the main attractions at college and university commencement ceremonies. However, these elements faded over time, and commencement speakers, specifically politicians or academics, eventually replaced student performances. Often, the commencement speaker emphasized the students' rite of passage into adulthood as well as the development of their moral character. During the 1800s, celebrities began to receive invitations to serve as commencement speakers, and since then, celebrity influence has increased greatly in higher education as celebrities now teach classes at colleges and universities. The use of celebrities allows colleges and universities to command the public's attention as members of the public feel as if they have a relationship with these individuals. Using the theoretical framework of parasocial interaction theory, the researcher examines the role of celebrities in higher education, specifically those delivering the keynote commencement addresses and discusses related issues emanating from this seemingly commonplace practice.

Keywords: popular culture, celebrity, commencement speakers, graduation

DEFINITION OF CELEBRITY

Hershey Friedman & Linda Friedman (1979) define a celebrity as a person who is different from yet recognizable by the public as a result of that individual's accomplishments. The public's acknowledgement and recognition of the celebrity's achievements and skills set them apart from the regular population. Friedman and Friedman (1979) note that celebrities may include athletes and entertainers, including actors and actresses. Thirty years later, Frank Furedi (2010) suggested that the term "celebrity" had taken a different meaning and had thus evolved over the years. He explained that the concept of celebrity "has become transformed through technological innovations, such as the cinema, popular press, and television. These technologies have turned celebrities into object of mass consumption" (p. 493). He contended that the notion of what makes up a celebrity has evolved through mainstream culture, particularly through popular culture and the media. Further elaborating on his ideas regarding how this term has evolved, Furedi (2010) explains:

The term celebrity is not simply a noun but an adjective that signifies that someone possesses the quality of attracting attention. So we have celebrity chefs, celebrity authors, celebrity fiction, celebrity diets, celebrity workouts, celebrity psychiatrists, celebrity therapists and celebrity doctors. Success in virtually every profession is associated with a celebrity status. Those who command the largest fees in the legal profession are described as celebrity lawyers. (p. 493)

Furedi (2010) maintained that as a result of media coverage and mass consumption, the term celebrity is used to describe any person who is accessible to the public. Hence, those who are in the media are famous, if for no other reason than that they are the product of television and movies. He contended that though these individuals often lack significant accomplishments, they have been manufactured for public consumption via television networks and motion pictures and appear to the public as such.

Although celebrities are famous because they are in the media, Christina Schlecht (2003) maintains that the notion of being a celebrity encompasses other aspects as well. She noted that the title celebrity implies personal characteristics and/or material possessions:

Celebrities are people who enjoy public recognition by a large share of a certain group of people whereas attributes like attractiveness, extraordinary lifestyle are just examples, and specific common characteristics cannot be observed, though it can be said that within a corresponding social group celebrities generally differ from the social norm and enjoy a high degree of public awareness (p. 3)

As Schlecht (2003) explained, people admire celebrities for their attractive appearance, and as Americans value such virtues, these celebrities are highly regarded. Moreover, the public expects these individuals to step out of their lavish residences with every strand of hair in its proper place. Not only are these celebrities self-conscious and hyper-aware of their appearance, American society expects such individuals to live their lives as under a microscope to be observed and analyzed by all. One commonality of the term celebrity, whether used as a noun or an adjective, is that it invariably commands attention. In recent decades, the meaning of celebrity has become more expansive and now is often applied to those who are famous, merely for being so. Furedi wrote, "The ascendancy of the celebrity has been fuelled [fueled] by society's uneasy relationship with the question of authority. Often celebrity provides an alternative source of validation" (p. 493). Most recently in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, the American citizens elected Donald Trump, a reality-television celebrity to serve as president, as opposed to Hillary Clinton, a figure of authority, who had previously served as Secretary of State, a U.S. Senator, and First Lady. Although she had been involved in a Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) investigation concerning her questionable use of a private email server to retain classified documents, she had served as a public servant with a long storied history in state, national,

and international politics. Her previous political positions alone sufficiently qualified her for the position of the presidency. On the other hand, Trump was the antithesis of Clinton as he had previously worked as a businessman and a reality-television star, who thus provided a different authenticity or image from that of the experienced politician to the American people.

Celebrity and Higher Education

Just as American politics have become influenced by celebrities, so have many other aspects of American culture, including that of higher education. In this respect, Furedi (2010) contended that colleges and universities are part of this celebrity culture as well:

And even the ivory tower of higher education has been brought into the frame. Universities are encouraged to embrace this culture and the shameless self-promoter has been rebranded as a celebrity academic. It is evident that celebrity status is in some sense a marker of authority and that its influence transcends the world of day-time cable television and at least indirectly influences all sections of society. (p. 493)

One way in which higher education embraces the concept of celebrity is in its use of celebrities as lecturers. Chris Webber, Kanye West, James Franco, Kal Penn, Spike Lee, Amal Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Kevin Spacey, Alex Baldwin, Tyra Banks, Angelina Jolie, Matthew McConaughey, and Questlove have all taught classes ranging from sports storytelling to leadership and film subjects, at colleges or universities worldwide (Abell, 2017; Burt, 2015).

Not only do celebrities teach classes, but they are becoming progressively involved in higher educational institutions. Matt Young (2019) has noted that the University of Texas (UT) has taken the use of celebrities a step further, as the university recently named Matthew McConaughey as the Minister of Culture for its new 10,000 seat basketball arena set to open in 2021. Describing the use of celebrities in higher education, Woohyun Yoo (2016) wrote:

Celebrities generate a higher level of awareness and retention because they stimulate people's collective or cultural consciousness. This heightened awareness of celebrities causes people to exhibit greater interest in a celebrity event. More attention to celebrity events or statements results in more retention. (p. 49)

Clearly, UT is striving to garner the public's attention to its status as an institution that has associated itself with a high-profile celebrity. McConaughey's role is to appeal to his fans and create an unforgettable UT atmosphere at the arena (University of Texas, 2018). Spring Sault (2018) explained how this celebrity is experienced in this capacity as "His whole career is based around developing characters that lend their essence to a film, and it's believed that the school is interested in making use of that same concept for their on-campus arena" (para. 2). In establishing a relationship with McConaughey, UT is using the recognition of his name as well as his high energy personality to create an atmosphere that will encourage fans to attend and participate in games played at the new venue. The university is aiming to create a culture in which members of the community attend games frequently at the arena. One way to accomplish this is to increase fan interest, which McConaughey enables UT to do by attracting the attention of a celebrity-obsessed and media-hungry populace. After all, his well-known face and persona appeal to potential attendees, making them curious about his connection with the institution.

However, McConaughey's role is slightly unconventional, even for a celebrity; in higher education, a more traditional role for celebrities is to serve as commencement speakers. In 2018 alone, high school and college graduates listened to the advice of celebrities such as Mindy Kaling, Amal Clooney, Oprah Winfrey, Sterling Brown, and Chadwick Boseman. Other celebrities who have delivered graduation speeches include Jim Cramer, Queen Latifah, Tim Cook, Cynthia Nixon, Jimmy Fallon, Lea Michele, Abby Wombach, Michael Keaton, Chance the Rapper, and Josh Groban (People, 2018; Wolfson, 2018).

HISTORY OF COMMENCEMENT SPEECHES

Fabry (2016) wrote that politicians have served as commencement speakers since institutions of higher learning have existed. John Winthrop, then governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, attended Harvard's 1642 commencement ceremony, which was the college's first such ceremony. Fabry (2016) continued to write that having politicians address students was an accepted but not a mainstream practice, as many colleges and universities required that their own students participate in these ceremonies. These students would address the audience, including graduates and guests, as they would engage in debates and perform orations in languages, such as Greek, Latin, and Hebrew, that they had studied at the college or university. Phyllis Vines (1976) reported that by the mid 1700s these graduation commencements had become community events, as audiences gathered to hear the students' orations. As commencement ceremonies became more community-based, their importance as a ritual to present the men who were now prepared to serve the community increased.

Explaining the concept of oration, Anthony Grafton (as cited in Fabry, 2016) wrote that this skill was "one of the central skills of the university" (para. 4). In fact, Lord Botetourt, Former Governor of Virginia, encouraged students to graduate by offering them significant monetary awards for orations that they would perform during commencement activities, with the stipulation that only graduating students could compete for these prizes. By offering such rewards, Botetourt hoped to increase the number of graduates, as many students entered college only to withdraw shortly thereafter (Thelin, 2004).

However, Fabry (2016) explained that over time, less emphasis was placed on students learning oratory skills, and as this emphasis faded, so did the role of student orations in the commencement ceremony. He detailed that as an alternative to student orations, institutions would often invite guest speakers, with many of the earliest speakers hailing from the host institution, while many of the other invited speakers were politicians. Rosanna Hertz and Susan Reverby (1995) discussed the fact that there is significant meaning behind an institution's choice of commencement speaker. "The choice of the speaker thus becomes a way an institution signals how it will be sending its graduates into the world and who they should become" (p. 595). In effect, the commencement speaker serves as a role model for its graduating seniors and is generally an individual that graduates hold in esteem and therefore strive to uphold the values emphasized by the commencement speaker. Hertz and Reverby (1995) contended that often members of the clergy were called upon to deliver the commencement speech because they could emphasize morals and impact graduates' ethical and spiritual decisions.

Even as late as the twentieth century, the commencement ceremony was viewed as an occasion that imparted societal expectations to students who had completed all their academic requirements and were graduating from the university. Describing the purpose of a commencement address, Markella Rutherford (2004) explained:

As a central ritual in an institution of key culture importance, the ceremonial discourse of the commencement speech not only calls attention to the occasion itself as a marker of an important life transition—a rite of passage—it also communicates (both explicitly and implicitly) what it means to be a full-fledged and "good" member of adult society. (p. 587)

She went on to explain that the commencement speech includes an "affirmation of values" (p. 587), which serves to influence and shape the values of the graduates of an institution. Rutherford further suggested that part of conveying morals to graduating students consists of commencement speakers explaining that graduates have to make decisions throughout their lives, and this notion of choice became a point of discussion in many commencement speeches that were delivered at the end of the twentieth century. In fact, Rutherford (2004)

performed a content analysis of 171 speeches and found that 112 of these speeches discussed the topic of choice. This trend of including choice in these speeches grew steadily from 11% between 1900 and 1909 to 50% in the 1930-1939 period. Then, after remaining steady for nearly twenty years, the idea of choice became a popular topic once again in many of the speeches delivered from 1960 to 2000. Of the commencement speeches Rutherford (2004) examined, 80% of those delivered in the final decade of the twentieth century incorporated the idea of choice.

As Rutherford (2004) discussed the factors that may account for this increase in the number of speeches concerning choice, she concentrated on the speakers' gender and employment. Her findings suggested that women were twice as likely to include choice in their speeches as their male counterparts. Yet she concluded that employment played little, if any, role in incorporating choice into commencement speeches, although those individuals employed in the legal and business fields were more likely to incorporate the idea of making choices into their speeches. In contrast, academics and celebrities were not the "primary cause" (p. 593) of the increased percentages of incorporating discussions of choice in commencement speeches (Rutherford, 2004).

Fabry (2016) noted that in the 1800s, there were some intervals from the traditional politician-as-commencement speaker, as Harvard invited Virginia Woolf's father, Leslie Stephens, an English author, to serve as the commencement speaker and address the graduating class of 1890. This practice continued becoming more commonplace in the 1900s, as Hertz and Reverby (1995) explained that celebrities were often selected for "their role by their very being, rather than what they actually say" (p. 596). Fabry (2016) noted that this trend of inviting celebrities to serve as commencement speakers became more conventional around the year 2000, when celebrities began serving as commencement speakers just as frequently as traditional or career politicians or scholars.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Celebrities provide a source of credibility to ordinary individuals, and their influence is prevalent in today's society, appearing in various spheres from advertisements to education, television and politics (Furedi, 493). Fabry (2016) suggested that the frequency of celebrities delivering commencement speeches rivaled that of politicians and scholars around the turn of the twenty-first century, and as a result, there's been more exposure than ever to celebrities during commencement ceremonies in the past twenty years. Considering that celebrities are delivering an increasing number of commencement speeches, it becomes clear that the public pays greater attention to events featuring celebrities; hence, people's recall of the message delivered in these speeches is greater when celebrities are involved (Yoo, 2016). With regard to higher education, the audience, which includes the graduates, will be more likely to remember the keynote address at their graduation ceremony, and the public will remember to attend because of the celebrity addressing those in attendance. With that said, a celebrity delivering a commencement speech solicits higher interest from the public and likely results in increased media coverage for institutions of higher education, thus enhancing the competitiveness of the colleges and universities in question.

Considering the large number of individuals who revere celebrities and since celebrities command attention, it is not surprising that the media, as well as the public, pay a higher degree of attention to events that feature celebrities. This is due in large part to the fact that members of the public feel as if they have a relationship with these individuals. In this respect, Donald Horton and Richard Wohl (1956) defined parasocial interaction theory as the relationship that audience members establish from viewing other individuals in the media. They described this resultant relationship as "one-sided, nondialectical, controlled by the performer, and not susceptible of mutual development" (Horton and Wohl, p. 215). A parasocial relationship is a one-way relationship in which the performer, or the speaker for the purpose of this article, is the one who conveys

and controls the given message. Horton and Wohl (1956) mentioned those individuals who work in broadcast media, such as reporters and anchors whose job it is to convey the news, are often the individuals that television views develop and form a relationship with. However, individuals in the media and or celebrities do not attempt to develop, foster, or nurture a reciprocal relationship by any means, as they are unaware that such a relationship exists. Consequently, the feelings, as well as the subsequent relationship, develop solely within the viewer, i.e. the audience or the public.

Even though parasocial relationships typically originate from seeing people in the media, such relationships are also established in face-to-face communication or when a speaker addresses a group of people. Illustrating the nature of these interactions, Horton and Anselm Strauss (1957) explained the following:

Parasocial interaction is governed also by the convention of non-interference; the performer fully controls the course of action. In face-to-face situations a relationship is likely to become parasocial when an audience is so large that a speaker cannot address its members individually; but parasocial interaction is especially favored by mass media which permits enormous audiences, yet each member is addressed in relative privacy, almost as though the speaker was present.” (p. 580)

Although the focus of parasocial interaction tends to be a relationship developed through the media, it can, as Horton and Anselm have explained, focus on large crowds in which the performer or the speaker is unable to interact on an individual or personal basis with each member of a large audience. Yet, despite the large number of individuals present at an event, some of the audience members may perceive the interaction as “immediate, personal, and reciprocal” but the speaker views the interaction in a much different light (Horton and Strauss, 1957, p. 580). In fact, the speaker sees the speech as one delivered to a group of individuals and is applicable to many of those attending the event. Tilo Hartmann (2016) explained that a parasocial relationship is about the audience’s “illusionary feeling of being in a mutual social interaction with another character while actually being in a one-sided non-reciprocal situation...” (p. 131). The audience has a tendency to believe that a relationship exists, although what the audience members experience is their feelings for the speakers while they perform the role that they were asked to perform.

When one applies parasocial interaction theory to a commencement ceremony featuring a celebrity speaker, one sees that the concept is similar. The celebrity speaker, otherwise known as the keynote speaker, is in control of the interaction at a graduation ceremony. As the celebrity addresses a graduating class, congratulating the class and celebrating its accomplishments, members of the audience form a relationship, albeit a superficial one, with the celebrity speaker. The audience members may feel that the speaker is addressing them, almost as in a private setting. In addition, in the case of the speaker being well known, this relationship may already be somewhat developed, as it is likely that the audience has previously seen this individual in the media. Such parasocial interactions serve as the basis of the emerging relationship, and as the audience is exposed to more facets of the celebrity’s character, the relationship develops further. Explaining how parasocial interactions can develop into dominant relationships that affect audiences, William Brown and Benson Fraser (2004) explained that this type of interaction “provides insight into how audience members establish seemingly interpersonal relationships with celebrities and identification explains how these relationships change values, beliefs, and behavior of audience individuals” (p. 105). In other words, parasocial interactions are very influential as those in attendance attempt to identify with the celebrity, acting in similar manners as these celebrities and mimicking their lifestyle.

In assimilating *the* qualities of celebrities, the audience members come to identify with these prominent individuals, hence possibly losing their self-identity and developing qualities that are characteristic of those of the celebrities they are “engaging” with via a parasocial interaction. Brown and Fraser (2004) described the

process of celebrity identification as the means of “adopt[ing] the values, beliefs, or behavior of well-known public figures or popular media characters in order to emulate their perceived image or accentuate their parasocial relations with the celebrity” (p. 105). As these relationships develop, there is a concurrent loss of one’s self-actualization collective consciousness and an assimilation of the celebrity’s self-actualization and collective consciousness, which can be both persuasive and pervasive in today’s society. Yoo (2016) highlighted that the use of celebrities can unify society as they offer a glimpse into one’s collective consciousness. As the celebrity commencement speakers deliver their address, they provide a glimpse into their values, beliefs, and attitudes, thus ultimately exerting an influence on those in attendance who wish to be like that celebrity.

DISCUSSION

Zachary Michael Jack (2019) asserted that it is somewhat risky for colleges and universities to invite celebrities to deliver commencement addresses because some have a tendency to engage in scandalous behavior. Jack (2019) explained that Bill Cosby, for one, had spoken at a number of commencement ceremonies and received several honorary degrees until his 2018 conviction of sexual assault. Since then, administrators at many colleges and universities have made the decision to rescind his honorary degrees in hopes of distancing their institutions from him. Prior to his conviction, Cosby was the quintessential celebrity to deliver the keynote address at graduation, as many had experienced a parasocial interaction and had subsequently developed a parasocial relationship with him from his days on *The Cosby Show*. People were quite familiar with him as he entered their homes via their television set, and they were accustomed to seeing him interact with his family. When Cosby, known as Cliff Huxtable on his television series, spoke to his children or to his wife, the viewers could relate to him, as it felt as if he was addressing them. Accordingly, a parasocial relationship existed among viewers of *The Cosby Show*, so it was an extremely momentous and personal experience when he addressed those attending a graduation ceremony, further developing and nurturing that parasocial relationship.

Despite the seemingly misguided focus on celebrities who speak at graduation ceremonies, Keith Whittington (2019) explained:

At the end of the day, commencement speakers are not very important. They are not part of the scholarly endeavor. They are not part of the robust exchange of ideas. They are window dressing. They add a patina of seriousness, or maybe simply glitz, to a graduation ceremony. (para. 3)

Consequently, celebrities do not contribute any intrinsic value to the ceremony, except for the fact that their mere presence captures the public’s as well as the media’s attention. Celebrity commencement speakers make the audience feel they have a relationship and a connection with the celebrity thus making the graduates feel good about themselves, the speaker, and their alma mater.

While celebrities who are invited to deliver commencement speeches do not make significant contributions to graduation ceremonies, the choice of inviting a celebrity speaker to deliver the commencement address is more about the visibility of the college or university and perhaps the publicity the institution can elicit. However, the choice of speaker, as well as the content and message of the speech, is often critiqued. Cynthia Greenlee (2018) wrote that because commencement speeches “emphasize young people’s civic and professional duties, it’s a highly politicized form of speech that’s subject to scrutiny” (para. 7). For example, Oprah Winfrey addressed the graduating class at Colorado College in May 2019, and the media scrutinized her address but less so as to the reasons why she spoke at a small private college with an enrollment of just over 2,000 students. Vince Bzdek (2019) noted that Winfrey’s speech was one in a series that featured speeches from other distinguished African Americans, including Ta-Nehisi Coates, Shaun King, and Ron Stallworth, during the previous months. Explaining the purpose of the speeches, Bzdek (2019) wrote, “The string of speeches is

no accident. Oprah, Coates, King and Stallworth all came to the campus during a very deliberate anti-racism, pro-inclusivity campaign that was launched by the school last fall” (para. 4). Colorado College launched the initiative in “response to racist emails that were sent out to the student body boasting of the superiority of whites and the economies of majority-white countries” (Bzdek, 2019, para. 5). Colorado College launched a campaign that focused on inclusivity and diversity with the goal of making all students feel comfortable within the college community. At the same time, Colorado College also had to restore its reputation, which had been tarnished because of the email scandal, so to an extent, with its focus on crisis management, the college campaign was somewhat self-serving

As colleges and universities may tend to be self-serving in their choice of graduation speakers, it is their hope that the invited celebrity will either gift the institution with a monetary donation or encourage others to do so, especially after the institution makes the news with its choice of celebrity speaker. The institution also benefits as their graduates may join the alumni association and contribute their time, money, and or talent to improving the college or university. In effect, it becomes a mutually beneficial relationship as the institution worked hard to arrange a celebrity to serve as the commencement speaker, so then, the graduates feel compelled to give back to their institution. Explaining this notion, Jack (2019) noted that, “Stars make headlines, and headlines help bring in the endowment-replenishing donations known as ‘major gifts’” (para. 1). Clearly, graduation is no longer a momentous occasion to celebrate the accomplishments and accolades of the students, but rather an opportunity to put the institution in the local, or even the national spotlight upon the announcement of the college or university’s commencement speaker. In addition, the institution will gain media attention on the day of the graduation ceremony, as the media will be present to cover the celebrity’s speech. As the college or university appears in the headlines, alumni and others will contribute to the institution upon hearing of the “productive” work the university is performing, and the work must be “productive,” as it has attracted a celebrity to deliver the keynote address at its graduation ceremony.

All in all, celebrity speakers provide institutions another - high profile - means that enable them to market themselves and to attract donors. What should have been a celebration of the graduating students’ accomplishments now boils down to an opportunity to solicit monetary gifts. Whittington (2019) best summed up the use of celebrities at commencement ceremonies by writing, “They [Celebrities] are expected to honor the graduates, and be honored by them in turn, and no one is expected to learn anything” (para. 4). The graduates, as well as their family and friends in attendance, honor the celebrity through the parasocial relationship they have developed with these individuals. By doing so, the graduates in particular feel as if the celebrity speaker is personally congratulating them for their success and sacrifice, which is meaningful to those in attendance. In addition, the graduates’ family and friends may feel that the celebrity is congratulating them for their sacrifices, yet this relationship is non-reciprocal, as the speaker does not experience feelings that are similar to those developed by the audience members. Nevertheless, because of the personal relationship with the speaker that the audience feels exists, they honor the speaker and hold them in esteem. Furthermore, as the media cover the celebrities who speak at commencements, they further extend and foster these parasocial relationships.

Instead of using celebrities that the institution may later have to distance itself from, Jack (2019) suggested that colleges and universities consider inviting individuals who are employed at non-profits in the local community. In doing so, he suggested that people will “reject the consumerist idea that bigger is always better, and that what celebrities say is somehow more meaningful” and students would learn that, “Meaningful success can be found far beyond the headlines” (Jack, 2019, para.14). He also contended that having a star-studded commencement ceremony takes away from accomplishments of the students, which is where the focus should be (Jack, 2019).

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Society Doesn't Owe You Anything: *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* & Video Games as Speculative Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Since Donald Trump's election in 2016, popular and scholarly commentators have been looking for speculative and/or dystopic literary works that might provide analogues for the Trump-era. Perhaps the most famous of these was the renewed popularity of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this regard, though, video games remain an underexplored fictional form. With its exaggerated and parodic satire of an America ruled by the corruption and greed of extreme right-wing populism, *Grand Theft Auto (GTA): San Andreas* (2004) offers a speculative fiction that players can enact as well as imagine, and simulate as well as prepare. Thus, reading the game through the lens of speculative fiction shows that *GTA: San Andreas* offers the kinds of intertexts, allusions, and parallels that Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018) argue is essential for making sense of a dystopic present.

Keywords: video games, game studies, popular culture, speculative fiction

I turn on the car radio and hear Mike Andrews proclaim “Society Doesn’t Owe You Anything,” a line from his motivational talk tour that will be coming to an arena near me. Mike ends the ad with “Are you saying this isn’t the greatest country in the world?” Since I’m not interested, I switch channels in time to hear a Public Service Announcement for a group that intends to ban green cards because “the lines are longer at the food store” and there are “19 million illegal immigrants” in the state already.¹ My phone rings and a government agent tells me “This history it’s all lies.” Instead of starting the mission that ensues, I add these to the growing list of ways *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, the highly influential and best-selling video game of 2004 (Webb 2019) is not only a dystopic fiction, but its game world, its story, its characters, and its in-game cultural productions can be read quite easily as a speculative fiction anticipating the rise of right-wing populism in the United States, culminating in the presidency of Donald Trump. While speculative fiction is interactive because it requires imaginative participation, a game allows players to enact it, as well. This crucial aspect of games adds to the level of engagement Gill (2013) cites as a necessary and vital part of any piece of speculative fiction. Like all of the games in the series, *GTA: San Andreas* presents an exaggerated America in which greed and corruption are the rule. Like all of the games in the series, it is an action-adventure that combines elements of role-playing, driving, and third-person action in addition to the games’ infamous eponymous task. However, *GTA: San Andreas* represents an inflection point in the series in terms of the vastness of the gameworld, the intertexts and allusions to American popular culture, and the detail of both. Read as a speculative fiction, then, the game offers a means of rehearsing, practicing, and preparing for the eventuality of a dystopic reality. Not only are there anti-immigrant screeds, the game also includes Russia owning the president and deep racial divisions in its course. Indeed, the comment, “Society does not owe you anything” was also stated directly and unproblematically by a guest on a segment of the right-wing talk show, *Fox and Friends*, in a segment detailing the evils of Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood and its host, the highly acclaimed and beloved Fred Rogers, to its audience (Mikkelsen 2019).²

Despite its title, in *Trump Studies*, Australian academics Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018, p. 2) acknowledge that the presidency of a reality TV caps the rapid rise of right-wing extremism in the early twenty-first century. Thus, they cite the need for consumers to refer to previous iterations of speculative dystopic fiction as a means of making sense of a “dystopic present.” They cite the rise of popularity of Orwell’s *1984* (1949), Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* (1935), and of course Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1985). Intriguingly, as Atwood was preparing to release a sequel, Classics scholar Michael Zimm (2019, August 13) proclaimed that video games were finally worthy of study alongside historical texts like the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*. Conversely, as far back as 2006, Blythe and Wright were discussing the potential of “pastiche scenarios,” their name for portions of games that imitate novel narrative, to allow players to imagine futures (p. 1139). However, as I argue elsewhere, the *Grand Theft Auto* games are pastiches not only in sections but in scope as well (Ouellette 2010). Likewise, since Trump’s election in 2016, popular and scholarly commentators have confined themselves to seeking (only) literary works for analogues to the Trump-era. For example, in looking at contemporary political attitudes and dystopian fiction, Jones and Paris (2018) get as far as looking at *The Hunger Games*, but not video games. Game scholars like Wills (2018) in *Gamer Nation*, a study of games and nationalism, Pérez-Latorre, et al. (2018), in their work on video games and the “social imaginary” of the great recession, and of course my own work on *GTA IV* (Ouellette 2010, 2011), limit themselves to contemporary games commenting on contemporaneous dystopian realities of the post-9/11 and Trump eras, respectively.

While video games are not at all underexplored as dystopic works, they have not as yet been considered in terms of their speculative visions of a dystopian future. Like Atwood’s novel, *GTA: San Andreas* reveals a nation of corruption, divisions, sexism, and rank profiteering. Unlike Atwood’s tale, however, players enact and participate in the rebuttal. Taking Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018) one step further, then, speculative fictional games let players simulate the dystopic present and prepare for it, combining a key function of each

form simultaneously. Thus, I begin by considering *GTA: San Andreas* as a dystopian speculative fiction whose combination of game elements, narrative, and gameworld offer a plausible depiction of an America beset by greed, corruption, and right-wing extremism. As a corollary, my paper offers a means of demonstrating that video games, current and past, are a substantial—\$43.8 billion worth in 2018 (Sanmarti 2019)—part of the present and the future of literature. Indeed, the fact that games allow players to participate in these outcomes makes them a powerful literary form to add to the roster of speculative dystopic fiction.

HAS IT ALWAYS BEEN LIKE THIS? GAMES AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

Typically, speculative fiction has been taken to include both the stereotypical and presumptive varieties of science fiction and fantasy. That is to say, it is a fiction that focuses on the technology or a fiction based more on social, political and cultural commentaries. However, scholars are increasingly recognizing that speculative fiction entails more of a “hybrid blend of generic features” (Cuder-Dominguez 2008, p. 177). *Grand Theft: Auto San Andreas* more than fits the bill. It combines the features of multiple game genres—racing, shooter, adventure, etc.—and multiple games—both mini-games like doing target shooting, and in-built versions of actual games like *Gyruss*. Moreover, as I write elsewhere (Ouellette 2010), the *Grand Theft Auto* games revolve around an elaborate satire of a particular era and include elements borrowed from popular movies like *Bullitt* and (the original) *The Italian Job*; i.e., those with car chases and big heists.³ Citing himself, Nick Bowman (2016, p. 31) explains that while “these games were not meant to satire popular gangster films [. . .] their content is decidedly dark, from the theft of vehicles to get from one mission to the next to the murder of rival crime bosses, police officers, and innocent bystanders who might interfere with the player’s objectives.” Since he is writing about moral panics, Bowman understandably omits a couple of key points that are easily overlooked when discussing *Grand Theft Auto*: it does actually have rather benevolent routines including firefighter and paramedic, and more importantly there has to be some truth for any satire to function as a social commentary. While the latter could or should be an entry point to a consideration of video games as speculative fiction, it remains unexplored.

Indeed, the extended satire actually reveals the ways in which video games share the characteristics in form and content, as well as in reception and perception, with speculative fiction. This occurs in several ways. For example, Marcus Schulzke (2013, pp. 264-265) as his title suggests, looks at games as what he calls “speculative history” because “historical simulation video games are perfectly suited for capturing history as a lived experience, they immerse players in detailed complex worlds that players can personally explore and interact with.” In this regard, *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and its successors offer a portrait of the United States of America at various points in its history. The games’ indexical grounding gives clues to its era through the music, the cars, the clothes, and the technology. Thus, the player can guess an approximate era and, if not the complete lived experience, can be immersed in the popular culture and therefore the politics of the period. The latter has two pair of interesting effects. As Belén Martin-Lucas (2014, p. 85) concludes, the fiction can be a worst-case scenario and still be plausible given the limits of the available extrapolation. The second part of the pairing stems from the source of concern for Martin-Lucas. She writes of speculative fiction and the “Glocal City”, where “glocal” is a neologism of global and local. In other words, the analysis entails the sociological and political insights to be gleaned from the revelatory nature of speculative fiction and its spatio-temporal location. Indeed, as I will show, *GTA: San Andreas* involves precisely this sort of focus, through setting themes, characterizations, and playing with them. The spatio-temporal location, an imagined recent America, with parodic satires of Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and San Francisco providing the locales and the intertexts, becomes crucial to the framing of the game and to understanding its governing rule structure.

3 My earlier article considers the sources of the satire in a depth that is beyond the scope of the present piece.

To put it simply, there are no rules and corruption reigns.

As well, political scientist Craig Hayden (2017) considers the combination of immersion, decision making, and critical commentary as a tool for teaching and learning in International Relations. Games then offer “an analytical perspective to unpack the relationship of ideological articulation within rule systems that encode political rhetoric in video games, games that rely on the tropes of speculative fiction” (p. 175). Algorithms predict as much as they interpret. They condition operations but also predict outcomes.⁴ However, Hayden’s approach also points to another of the tendencies of scholars when considering games and their relationship with speculative fiction. They put games alongside speculative fiction, or they assert that games borrow from speculative fiction, not that games *are* speculative fiction. For example, no less a critic than Ian Bogost (2008) whose own “procedural rhetoric” plays a part in Hayden’s method, offers that speculative practices include “literature that speculates about possible worlds that are unlike our own, but in a way that remains coupled to the actual world more than the term ‘science fiction’ might allow. Speculative fiction is fantastic, yet somehow grounded” (pp. 30-31). For Bogost, the grounding occurs because there is a material analogue in speculative fiction. He cannot, then, envision a procedure for facilitating such a grounding in a video game.⁵

That said, Mark Salter (2011), also taking a cue from Bogost, places games alongside speculative fiction first as a means of justifying their study, but also for considering the geopolitical potential of games, Salter writes, “Games are just as important, widespread, consumed and telling as speculative fiction, such as *Harry Potter* books or *Star Trek*. Games, as artifacts of culture, are more than simply mirrors of dominant ideologies or sites of sly resistance; they are also technologies of the self—particularly indicators of the ideals and limits of socially acceptable geopolitical behaviour” (p. 359). Importantly, though, Salter alludes to the fact that a text can have multiple and simultaneous valid readings. Even so, this is somewhat undercut by the sense of needing to justify the study of games by placing them alongside an equally disparaged form. As Martin-Lucas (2014) observes, “Despite its relegated position within academia—due to elitist bias within which the discipline of Literary Theory has regularly looked at what is generally called ‘popular fiction’—speculative fiction is a major influence in contemporary culture” (p. 85). Likewise, video games are increasingly important cultural texts and cultural artefacts that continue to receive the approbation of some academics.

Moreover, as McAllister, et al. (2016) highlight, the *Grand Theft Auto* series has been a target of negative criticism from both popular and academic sources as too low-brow, too graphic in its depictions, and too reliant on violence and stereotypes *but* more significantly, these responses have conditioned and mediated fan responses and responses from Rockstar Games itself in subsequent releases.⁶ Further, as I highlight elsewhere (Ouellette 2010), if one takes Baudrillard at his word, *Grand Theft Auto* portrays a hyperreal America. As Martin-Lucas (2014) notes of speculative fiction, “In recent years this genre has often been considered a most apt mode for narratizing the present times of ultra-rapid changes in science and technology as well

4 In case it is not intuitively obvious, algorithms serve a predictive function in a variety of games. In *Forza Horizon 4*, a racing simulator, an algorithm predicts collisions. For a first-person shooter like *Call of Duty: Infinite Warfare*, an algorithm offers the odds of mission success. Sports simulators predict player performance. That said, it could be argued that a simple routine like the on-screen projectile in the original *Space War* game involves predicting the trajectory and the likelihood of contact.

5 Intriguingly, Jess Morrisette (2020) notes that the omnipresence of vending machines in a wide range of video games provide an important semiotic grounding in (a) reality. Here, it is worth noting that *GTA: San Andreas* has its share of vending machines for Sprunk, an energy replenishing drink, and a host of billboards, radio ads, and store locations for parodic versions of well-known brands.

6 In other words, as much as it might be tempting to draw conclusions based on a media effects approach, even for a game like *GTA*, the responses of fans and developers are more complex than any one reading might encompass. Moreover, in a very detailed series of tweets from an important scholar, Bonnie (Bo) Ruberg (6 Aug. 2019) notes with caution that “more & more, reviewers are instructing feminist, queer, & POC game scholars to tie their work explicitly & extensively to a certain ongoing, large-scale, game-related harassment campaign.” While perhaps well-intentioned, as Ruberg notes these reactionary calls tend to come from scholars outside games and/or outside gender studies and can have significant unintended negative consequences for the writer.

as social structuring (p. 85). Here it is worth noting that this function of speculative fiction maps onto the first of Frasca's (2003, p. 232) four levels of simulation, namely the one "simulation shares with narrative and deals with representation and events. This includes the characteristics of objects and characters, backgrounds, setting and cut scenes." In Urbanski's (2015) words, speculative fiction becomes particularly useful in its ability to offer social critique because it "shows us our nightmares and therefore contributes to our efforts to avoid them" (p. 1). Put simply, the institutionalized right-wing extremism became the stuff of nightmares during Trump's presidency—at least to a "legal alien" who holds an H1B Visa—and almost willfully so. Writing not of speculative fiction but of the speculative economy that drives and is driven by the increases in global digitization, Nick Dyer-Witheford (2010) writes: "Economic crisis is colliding with climate chaos, ecological exhaustion, energy depletion and emergent challenges to a fiscally bankrupt but militarily dominant imperial hegemony. To foresee cataclysmic instabilities ahead is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, but a historically-informed extrapolation from current tendencies" (p. 499). From the rise of reactionary religious zealotry and right-wing politics, to the dehumanization, degradation and deportation of immigrants to vast police corruption, Russian operatives, glibness about school shootings, groundless fear of socialism, and rampant racism, all effected through a ruling ethic of greed and corruption, *Grand Theft Auto* is as predictive as it is demonstrative.

SPECULATION AND SIMULATION: PLAYING GTA: SAN ANDREAS

Intriguingly, it is scholars in other fields—history, and political science—who are considering the predictive and speculative tendencies of video games. For example, Marcal Sanmarti (2019) highlights the ways games can become political tools through rampant gamification: "Seeing how videogames are turning into such a powerful way to tell stories and to engage the masses, we can also wonder if videogames have become mass media already. Would the political world miss the chance to use such a powerful tool to control the narrative?" (p. 9). In other words, games become another form of social media for political operatives to manipulate through messaging or to use as analogues when promoting a particular candidate or policy. Such a game, then, offers an opportunity to speculate and to rehearse the material. I would argue that *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* offers a first step in the process and it does so in and through moments when story maps onto play and vice versa, not the least of which is the set of in-game political advertisements. The principle means of delivering the key material, however, remains the radio. However, signs and billboards, place names, characters and storylines offer other means which occasion the game's eerily prophetic version of American dystopia, one which proclaims, "It's only a small step from mass transit to communism." For the remainder of the paper, I will consider primarily the elements of the game that shape and construct the gameworld and its ruling ethic of greed and corruption.

The combination of play and story seems to confirm and complement if not partly contradict Aarseth's (2004) comments about games and their intertexts. In fact, at certain moments the game becomes its own intertext through the pastiche that gives shape to its speculative satire. For example, even though the game is set in the early 1990s and was released in the early "noughties," its anticipation of right-wing media rings true.⁷ The in-game radio station, WCTR and its host Lazlow, who plays a version of himself, has more affinity with Sean Hannity, Rush Limbaugh, and Bill O'Reilly. Like Limbaugh, the in-game Lazlow, who goes by one name in real life and in the game, admits to being a recovering addict and having narrow worldviews. Like O'Reilly, he is misogynistic, racist, and harasses women. The program, *Entertaining America*, features an interview with a would-be gangster rapper, O-G Loc, who is eager to cozy up to the right-wing politicians. Prior to Lazlow's interview with the rapper, the station announcer refers to the program, *Entertaining America*, which had just taken a glib look at school shootings and announces, "That was *Entertaining America*, showing why

7 While the game studio that produces GTA games is based in the UK, the writers and the primary audience are American.

America is so respected [. . .] across the world.” While the game mocks America, and the myth that it is held in high regard worldwide, the mockery Laslow invokes echoes Trump’s frequent insistence that he would make America great again and that under him America is respected again. Yet Trump makes headlines for the fact that world leaders openly mock him, as they did during NATO meetings in December 2019 (Lyons & Wintour, 2019, December 4). As much as the player can turn off the radio at any time and isn’t always in a vehicle, the player also learns very quickly that there are clues and information to be had by listening to the radio, but also echoes of the game’s primary themes of institutionalized corruption. Though not directly part of the game, these still foster the construction of the game world and the experience of it. Lazlow admits at one point, “So, the media. You may hate us, but I gotta tell you, we hate ourselves more. And stop accusing us of being liberal! What a load of crap! This station is owned by AmmuNation! I mean, have you ever heard anyone complain about guns on this station? Hosts are getting shot all the time, but it gets glossed over.”

Within my first three years in the U.S.A., journalists had been massacred at the *Capital Gazette* in Maryland (Bui, et al 2019), threatening packages had been sent to *CNN* (Wagner, M. et al., 2018, November 5), a plot to start a race war by shooting up Richmond, VA (Williams, et al 2020), and of course Trump tacitly agreed to the murder and dismemberment of Jamal Khashoggi, called the press “the enemy of the people,” and cheered on a politician who assaulted a journalist, lied about it, and was convicted for it ((Roig-Franzia and Ellison 2020). This is significant because as in *Grand Theft Auto*, nothing has curbed the corruption. The recent election of at least U.S. representatives—whom I will not name—who believe and spread wild conspiracy theories—which I will not name—confirms that the movement continues. The lesson of *GTA: San Andreas* is that the only option remaining is to beat the corrupt figures at their own game.

The *Fox News* parallels hold in and through other guests and advertisements. A religious cult-leader who has resonances with Jordan Peterson is a subsequent guest with Lazlow. The creator of “Epsilonism” wants men to be more like hunter-gatherers, eat meat, and compares human behaviour to that of a sponge in order to release the “scared little boy beneath.” For his part, Peterson adopts lobsters as a model, a beef-only diet, and blames feminism (Grainger 2018). WCTR News also offers a warning from gun manufacturers “Arm yourself or die.” In fact, NRA propaganda ramped up significantly during Obama’s administration with constant warnings that the Democrats were going to seize people’s guns (Haltiwanger 2019). However, with the NRA’s involvement with Russian gangsters and operatives during the Trump campaign (Orden 2020), an allegedly Second Amendment friendly regime has actually led to greater amounts of “arm yourself” rhetoric, including threats of civil war and demonstrations like those in Richmond and in the Kentucky capitol (Frankfort), with men in paramilitary gear flooding the legislative gallery, a move repeated on a national scale on 6 Jan. 2021 (Wade 2020). The only difference in *Grand Theft Auto*’s version of Fox News is its admission. WCTR’s motto is a straightforward “we distort, you can’t retort,” “state controlled media,” and “reporting what the memo tells us to.” These would-be exaggerations, if we take the game as a satire, but as a speculative text, it anticipates the Trump era lyric of Fox and Sinclair media operations. While it might be a response to the infamous post 9/11 memos from Clear Channel about songs and from MPIAA boss Jack Valente insisting that the entertainment industry should produce overly jingoistic material (Dixon 2004), the exaggeration for emphasis situates the text within a specific era. This relates especially to the available decisions and to the limits of the game world. Trump frequently threatened to suspend the broadcast licenses of media outlets that criticize him and has demanded that his response to the corona virus outbreak be “appreciated” by one and all (Roig-Franzia and Ellison 2020). The exaggerated warning in *GTA: San Andreas*, then, highlights the available intertexts that occur through playing, enacting, and witnessing the dystopian logic of the *Grand Theft Auto* world. Moreover, it presents a version of reality in which all of the normal stops on government corruption have failed. This makes the seemingly unethical acts the game entails much more plausible and indeed attractive to the player.

The speculative fictional world also includes mention of a government with anti-environmental

policies and featuring “senators [who] are burning your constitution.” In one advert, the politicians promise to “wage war on nature, so you don’t have to.” Alas, the dystopian vision has become prophetic, as evidenced by the adverts that appear throughout the game and by the very same language being used to describe Mitch McConnell’s tactics in the U.S. Senate (Reich 2019). Some of the in-game comments echo the American glibness about school shootings, years before Sandy Hook and Parkland. Adverts for Executive Intruder Extermination Services—a kind of predecessor of Blackwater—warns that “children will be equipped with bulletproof vests, and, depending on if they attend public schools, stun guns, and mace.” That said, the service also promises to protect families “from the evils of a liberal society,” and do it “the Patriotic way; that is, with overwhelming firepower.” Here, I would remind readers of Trump’s pivot following the mass shooting in El Paso, TX, in 2019, to blame video games as the root cause of the shooter’s motive in order to distract white, suburban voters, and especially women to distract them from the impact of Trump’s racist agenda (Picchi 2019). *Grand Theft Auto*, through its “Degenetron” adverts both mocks and necessarily anticipates right-wing and/or reactionary backlash against games.

Since the release of *Grand Theft Auto III*, the makers have planned for and tried to incite a backlash against the game. Rockstar Games went to the trouble of hiring one of Britain’s most notorious spin-doctors, Max Clifford, to ensure an aggrieved public (Kohler 2012). Thus, at least some authorial intent can actually be inferred or surmised in terms of the game’s predictive, speculative fiction. If anything, Rockstar and Clifford more than did the job, for they created a plausible speculative fiction of an America that is paralyzed by its intractable contradictions, all of which stem from the stated belief in life, liberty and freedom, a state sanctioned distrust of the state itself, and the resultant competition over who or what is more American than the rest. Clifford’s past and present function has only one purpose: increase the bottom line. This calls into question any purported subversion that the game might offer (Ouellette 2010). Moreover, unfettered capitalism can only be impeded by democratic society, as Trump advisor, Peter Thiel, one of the founders of PayPal has asserted multiply in print (Tarnoff 2016). As one in game advert explains “[Announcer] Nobody offers you more gaming value, and you’ll teach the kids some important life lessons about *real* capitalism. [child] ‘Dad, I lost all my money.’” Thus, it is not surprising to hear adverts for anti-environment companies or for the in-game version of Chik-filA which admits,

Cockle-doodle doo, we’re a huge corporation
Cockle-doodle doo, and we can’t be stopped
All of your protestors can go to hell
It’s time for Clucking Bell

Here, I would add that Trump’s first EPA boss, Scott Pruitt was using agency resources to set up a Chik-fil-A franchise network for his wife, that is, when he wasn’t busily promoting the destruction of several natural monuments, national parks, and wildlife refuges (Tatum 2018).

Perhaps no character embodies this more than *Grand Theft Auto*’s celebrity turned right-wing demagogue, Mike Andrews. Like Trump, Andrews holds noxious rallies proclaiming, “Rags are Riches.” Like Trump, Andrews is a shameless nationalist who proclaims, “Society doesn’t owe you anything! The government has better things to worry about. Like killing innocent people.” Crowds chant the now familiar “U-S-A, U-S-A” during his rallies, in which he says, “Instead of complaining about being poor [. . .] enjoy it.” When a woman replies that she cannot afford her rent, Andrews immediately goes to “Whoa, bitch! Settle it down! Are you saying this ain’t the greatest country in the world?” Predictably the crowd begins its “U-S-A” chant, a tacky chant aimed at disturbing and intimidating America’s opponents. As alluded to earlier, in a segment on Trump’s favourite Fox News program, *Fox and Friends*, repeats Andrews’ sentiments almost word-for-word in a segment proclaiming the evils of legendary children’s program, *Mr. Rogers’ Neighborhood*. As a basis for the claims, they cite Louisiana State professor of finance, Don Chance, whose qualification was

an opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal complaining that millennials are too entitled. The hosts repeatedly referred to Chance's comment, "The world owes you nothing. You have to work and compete. If you want to be special, you'll have to prove it" (qtd. in Mikkelsen 2019). *Grand Theft Auto* seemingly envisions the worst stereotype every other nation holds about America, Americans, and American exceptionalism. Trump merely makes it real. One could argue he is actually the most American president.

In this regard, then it is worth noting that *Grand Theft Auto* also hits three of the American right's favourite talking points: hatred of immigrants, conspiracy theories, and pandering to the Christian right. The last more notably appears in *GTA: Vice City*, but a corrupt preacher hangs out with gangsters and Russian mobsters in Jizzy's club. In fact, *Grand Theft Auto* seems to have Rep Devin Nunes and his family in mind when a radio ad for "Proposition 832" proclaims, "19 million illegal aliens live in this country, [. . .] Our organization is Ban Immigration Greencards Outright Today! Let's preserve the status quo in our favour. [. . .] Illegal aliens do a valuable job packing our groceries and caring for your lawn. But they should learn America is not a land of handouts. While they're illegal they have no rights! They have no status! They have no expectations. And they're happy to be here. It's a win-win for America. If we give them green cards, soon they'll be just like us, overweight, unhappy, and too lazy to do menial tasks." Like Trump's own organization, the Nunes family relies on undocumented immigrants to work on their factory farms even as the politician actively campaigns against immigration and in favour of locking children in cages (Lizza 2018). In fact, this passage hints at aspects of American exceptionalism and its duplicity, as well as the hypocrisy of America's constant corporate welfare and attacks on the poor and on social programs. Moreover, America was built on exploiting others and their labour, whether it was slaves, Chinese labourers, undocumented workers, irregular immigrants, or First Nations.⁸ It also reveals the duplicity of the mythical American dream, a myth exploded by another set of commercials for the American Bank of Los Santos. These promise to "help you get the debt you need to make life easier. We'll show you how to look richer and be poorer [. . .] it's only a risk if you get into money troubles or the economy changes, which doesn't seem likely." As we know, the USA still has not fully recovered from the "Great Recession." Wages remain stagnant and income disparity is at levels that resemble feudalism. Not surprisingly, then, the group in favour of keeping undocumented workers but also opposed to their naturalization has initials that spell out "B.I.G.O.T.," bigot. Fifteen years on, the speculative fiction of *Grand Theft Auto* seems almost prophetic and Stephen Miller, the zealous conspiracy theory advocate and architect of every one of Trump's racist and xenophobic immigration and Visa policies, seems more like a *GTA* character than a high-ranking government advisor.

Every game is a potential world. We have always known this to be true. Writing on a later installment of the series, I (Ouellette 2011) suggest that *Grand Theft Auto's* satire takes place within a larger pastiche because the "genre of the model [. . .] is not only the same as the genre of the imitation, the imitation occurs within the context of a video game built around and celebrating the same qualities" (p. 205). This is precisely the terrain of speculative fiction, but also the very contingency of games. Russell Gill (2013) explains that speculative fiction not only entails a "representation of what would happen had the actual chain of causes or the matrix of reality-conditions been replaced with other conditions [. . .] some speculative fiction is intended to bring recognition better characterized by engagement" (p. 73). Games provide not only engagement, they also facilitate and foster the enactment of solutions and rehearsals to the problem. More specifically, then, *GTA: San Andreas* represents a world in which the chain of checks and balances on greed and institutional corruption have been supplanted and the primary condition, which is also the win condition, is to beat the corrupt figures at their own game.

8 These last two terms are the preferred nomenclature adopted by the Canadian government.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, in considering games as speculative, even prophetic fiction, we can most assuredly contribute to ongoing social critique and more importantly, how to improve things. This may seem counter-intuitive, but as Martin-Lucas (2014) notes, dystopic speculative fiction involves “catastrophic futures in the wake of nuclear disaster, ecological ruin, global economic crisis, totalitarian regimes, or more often a combination of all of these. Although dystopia is usually considered a pessimistic and depressive mode of writing, this is in fact a genre of hope: after all, there is a life beyond the apocalypse and, even more importantly, dystopic fictions’ cautionary tales signal the ways to prevent it happening” (p. 85). This is precisely what games do. Solving a game is always about solving a problem. A vast, hybrid form like *GTA* more than fits the bill. It may not have the high-brow appeal of *Mass Effect*, which Hayden (2017) lauds for presenting the means to perceive political possibilities, but its scope, its content and its reach are no less laudable. Its portrayal of the rise of right-wing populism prepared me for political possibilities of the Trump presidency. Certainly, as an expat Canadian, I have a different sensibility. Nevertheless, as David Leonard (2003) reminds us, games offer

insight into dominant ideologies, as well as the deployment of race, gender, and nationalism. [. . .] game players are able to transport themselves into foreign and dangerous environments [. . .] Video games thus operate as a sophisticated commodity that plays on the device of individuals to experience the other, breaking down real boundaries between ‘communities’ through virtual play, while simultaneously ‘teaching’ its players about stereotypes, United States foreign policy, and legitimization of the status quo, to name only a few. (p. 1)

What becomes clear, then, is that one encounters these elements in *GTA* through stories, side-missions, parallel texts, meta-texts, and incidental moments. It is through the actual play of the game, building a multi-ethnic, multi-racial network of alliances, taking down corrupt police and politicians, and acting most definitely like a socialist in forming a “family” that one wins the game. *GTA* does offer its own solution to the problem of an American authoritarian regime: take it to the streets and beat them at their own game.

In fact, the overwhelming tendency in the scholarship has been to put games alongside other media to argue for their relevance. We should be enumerating instances of games *as speculative* not as being mentioned alongside speculative fiction. Likewise, games scholars should be highlighting the fact that games afford players the simultaneity of enacting and of witnessing the speculative fiction.⁹ Put simply, this is the moment the game functionally and literally becomes its own intertext. Hearing one of Donald Trump’s incoherent speeches evokes a memory of having played *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas*, not the other way around. According to Martin-Lucas (2014, p. 85), the defining criteria for contemporary speculative fiction is that it engages in “historically informed extrapolation[s] of current affairs if it is to remain a genre of social critique.” This applies to the experience of the game as an extended or complete pastiche scenario (Blythe & Wright, 2006). Not only does *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* offer a critique of the culture in which it was produced, it speculates about its future and offers critiques of the dystopia to come. Moreover, the study of games as speculative fiction offers an(other) instance in which the study of games contributes to the study of more traditional narrative forms, for speculative fiction is necessarily participatory, a facet also left underexplored in the literature. Where literature lets people rehearse responses to dystopia, games let them simulate and practice those responses, as well. While Brabazon, Redhead, and Chivaura (2018) quite rightly note that people shocked and appalled by the Trump regime turned to speculative fiction to help them make sense of things, it is equally important to note that Condis (2018) likewise notes that games became a source for “memes and talking points” that the alt-right latched onto in an effort attract followers (p. 103). Thus, games represent a

9 In French, we might call this *témoignage*, which roughly translates to witness/testimony.

contested space, one that scholars would be well advised to consider more seriously or, as she writes later, “we risk abandoning one of the world’s largest entertainment and communication machines to those who would use it for evil ends” (27 March 2019).¹⁰ Games, then, offer an important complement when teaching the genre just as surely as speculative fiction should become a regular feature of game design. Participation takes the form of playing through not just the text but also the dystopia we are currently enduring and unfortunately, those to come.

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10 Here, I have to admit that the accompanying headline “From *Fortnite* to Alt-Right” gives me more than a little pause and in reading the article, I am sure it was a newspaper “clickbait” headline more than a reflection of the content. Indeed, the opinion piece acknowledges that games are a “vector” for alt-right recruitment online and this is certainly the case. However, social media provided an important mechanism for the “Arab spring” and games are becoming a key means of promoting civic engagement and democratic principles in developing countries (Fisher, 2020).

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The Many Ways of Wakanda: Viewpoint Diversity in *Black Panther* and Its Implications for Civics Education

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ABSTRACT

Like many of its superhero film predecessors, *Black Panther* (2018) achieved widespread popularity both domestically and internationally. Although the film examines the focal character T'Challa's (Black Panther) attempt to balance his dual responsibilities as king and protector of Wakanda, the viewpoint diversity displayed by its citizens suggests that the film's central character is Wakandan society. Drawing on events and themes from the film, the essay argues that social domain theory (SDT)—a theory that attempts to explain the development of sociomoral concepts across the lifespan—provides a useful lens to examine Wakandans' viewpoint diversity as portrayed in the film, specifically with regards to general similarities between the sociomoral considerations at the heart of the film, and those people bring to bear when understanding their social worlds. Moreover, the essay contends that such an analysis suggests that *Black Panther* (2018) may have some value for primary school educators as a potential aid towards their efforts to create learning activities related to civics education.

Keywords: Black Panther, superheroes, society, education, social studies, children, civics, sociomoral development

As the highest grossing superhero film featuring a solo superhero, *Black Panther* (2018) landed in the top-five and top-ten lists of the highest grossing domestic and international films of all time respectively shortly after its release (Busch, 2018). It was also the first film shown in Saudi Arabia's first movie theater opened after the lifting of its 35-year-old movie theater ban (Lanigan, 2018). The film has been further distinguished from most other superhero films through its garnering of reactions (in the form of reviews and commentaries) from writers, journalists, and research analysts on topics such as racial politics, identity, representation, political activism, economic and foreign policy, and natural resource management. Moreover, educators from primary schools to colleges have created curricula, syllabi, and activities aimed to promote critical thinking around the themes addressed in or related to the film (Muncy, 2018; Platt, 2018).

Further explicating ideas introduced elsewhere (2018, 2019a, 2019b), the present essay contends that although the official main character in *Black Panther* (2018) is T'Challa, it is the film's unofficial main character—Wakandan society—that partially explains the film's popularity and interdisciplinary appeal. The essay further argues that at the conceptual (abstract) level, both the sociomoral features of Wakandan society and the resulting viewpoint diversity displayed amongst its citizens have implications for social studies education in primary schools, specifically with respects to civics education. As such, the following essay is aimed at primary school teachers and teachers in training, for the purpose of identifying ways that certain features of Wakandan society can potentially assist in the generation of civics-related learning activities for students in Grades 2-5.

First, some relevant ideas and findings based on social domain theory (SDT; Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2014) — a psychological theory of sociomoral development—will be discussed. Although brief, the following overview aims to identify some general features that are central to the essay's arguments. Second, broad connections are drawn between the sociomoral features of human life and societies highlighted by SDT and similar features of Wakandan life and society as depicted in *Black Panther* (2018). The essay concludes with some implications for primary school educators who may be interested in using some features of Wakandan society to generate civics-related learning activities.

SOCIAL DOMAIN THEORY (SDT)

A Brief Overview

According to the ideas supporting SDT (Turiel, 1983, 2002), early in their development, children try to actively interpret and understand both their own interactions with others and interactions among others through the use of concepts belonging to three distinct domains. The *moral* domain includes concepts such as harm/welfare (physical and psychological), justice/fairness, and rights/civil liberties. The *socio-conventional* domain deals with concepts pertaining to norms, laws, rules, policies, and authority. The *personal* (sometimes called *psychological*) domain deals with considerations involving emotions, intentions, wants/desires, autonomy, and personal jurisdiction. Each domain develops independently from the others. These domains are qualitatively distinguished from each other through the use of criterion judgments, which are judgments pertaining to acts (e.g., their generalizability, rule-contingency, alterability, etc.) that suggest that children construe acts within one domain (e.g., moral) as fundamentally different from acts in the other domains (e.g., psychological) (Turiel, 1983, 2002).

Primary school recess offers a useful illustration of the relevance of these three domains in the everyday lives of children. Children's games often encompass rules for how to play them (socio-conventional), and the smooth progression of gameplay is contingent upon the participants behaving in a respectful manner towards each other so as not to cheat (moral) or harm (moral) others. In addition, children are free to move from game to game and to play with whom they wish as matters of preference (personal). Moreover, there are often rules instituted by authorities (e.g., teachers) demarcating the beginning and end of recess (socio-conventional).

According to SDT, one implication of the presence of diverse social concepts is that social interactions are often complex and multifaceted (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006; Turiel & Perkins, 2004; Turiel & Wainryb, 2000; Wainryb, 2004, 2006). Such complexity is reflected in the kinds of conceptual or domain-based interactions individuals navigate when relating to others. One example includes social interactions that are considered *mixed* or *multifaceted*, whereby concepts within multiple domains (Smetana, 1983; Turiel, 1983) or concepts within the same domain (Turiel, 1983) are evident in the same interaction. Referring to the recess example, an instance of the former could be a situation where a child is deciding whether to share the tetherball (moral) or continue playing with it because they want to play with it until recess ends (personal). An example of the latter could be a team captain trying to decide whether or not they should exclude their friend from being on their team because they would have too much of an advantage over the other team (moral), realizing that excluding the friend would hurt their feelings (moral).

Another kind of social interaction is a *second order* one whereby an individual commits an act in one domain that has implications for another domain (Smetana, 1983; Turiel, 1983). For instance, a child who decides to disobey a rule to stop playing at the end of recess (socio-conventional) continues running and accidentally crashes into another student, hurting the student in the process (moral). Hence, given the different domains, their respective concepts, and the varied ways these domains and concepts interact within social spaces, SDT further contends that coordination—the ability to weigh differing concepts or considerations when judging interactions—is important for navigating the social world (Helwig, Ruck, & Peterson-Badali, 2014; Horn, 2005; Nucci, 2014; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Smetana, 1983; Smetana, Jambon, & Ball, 2014; Turiel & Gingo, 2017).

Children's Sociomoral Capacities

Although the present essay focuses on older children (where older refers to children between the ages of seven and eleven), younger children's ability to make domain distinctions in the context of both real and hypothetical social interactions is well-documented (Killen & Smetana, 1999; Nucci & Turiel, 1978; Smetana, 1981; Tisak, 1993; Yau & Smetana, 2003). The reasons for selecting age seven as a starting point will be discussed later. The following summary of relevant findings is meant to highlight the general *capacities* or *potentialities* of older children and the ways these capacities are brought to bear in their attempts to comprehend diverse sociomoral phenomena. It is the contention of this essay that similar capacities were brought to bear in the myriad conflicts Wakandan citizens found themselves in in *Black Panther* (2018).

With regards to domain-distinctions, findings based on children's evaluations of acts and their justifications for their evaluations indicate that older children are able to distinguish between acts occurring in different domains (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001; Hollos et al., 1986; Nucci, 1981; Nucci et al., 1996; Nucci & Turiel, 1993) as well as acts occurring within the same domain (Davidson et al., 1983). Although for many situations it is difficult to predict a particular type of evaluation justification (e.g., Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Kahn, 1992; Smetana et al., 1991), the justifications related to older children's construals of moral (Davidson et al., 1983; Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Kahn, 1992), socio-conventional (Davidson et al., 1983; Turiel, 1983), and personal (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001; Davidson et al., 1983; Helwig, 1998; Nucci & Turiel, 2009) acts suggest that their understanding of these acts at the conceptual level are generally more nuanced and elaborate than those of younger children.

A related capacity evident in older children's sociomoral understanding is their ability to balance their understanding of the features of acts with their understanding of the roles of authorities in potentially regulating those acts. One byproduct of this kind of coordination is a more flexible approach to certain situations such that children's support for intervention (or in cases of transgressions, punishment) by authorities varies depending on the nature of the act, such as believing punishment is more appropriate during moral transgressions than socio-conventional violations (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001; Hollos et al.,

1986). Older children have also been found to negatively evaluate both a moral transgression and a school rule permitting the transgression, whereas younger children are more likely to positively evaluate the moral transgression when it has been sanctioned by an authority figure (Weston & Turiel, 1980). As suggested by research, some other examples of concepts older children at least attempt to coordinate include concepts related to (1) democratic decision-making and psychological features of persons (Helwig & Kim, 1999), (2) laws and morality (harm, rights) (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001), (3) laws, systems of government, and freedom of speech (Helwig, 1998), and (4) learning context and psychological features of persons (Helwig et al., 2008).

SDT AND VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY IN WAKANDA

The preceding analysis suggests that insofar as popular fiction possesses potential educative value with respect to children's sociomoral understanding, certain general features should be present. The first is the presence of distinct domains of social concepts whose purpose is to organize the characters' social worlds in a way that is similar to or at least parallels the ways they help organize children's social worlds in everyday life. The second is a social context that allows for these domains and/or concepts to interact in diverse ways. Without the benefit of knowing precisely how the characters in *Black Panther* (2018) construed the concepts and situations they faced, it is not possible to state with any degree of certainty that the characters made the kinds of domain distinctions discussed above. Film characters often do not justify their judgments within the context of the plot in the manner usually ascertained through the interviews conducted by SDT researchers (e.g., Turiel, 1983). This limitation notwithstanding, it appears reasonable in light of the aforementioned discussion to at least consider the possibility of analyzing the film through an SDT oriented lens.

Regarding the first general feature suggested by SDT that pertains to the potential educative value of *Black Panther* (2018), the film contains numerous acts and situations that can be viewed as being associated with distinct social concepts. For instance, inherently moral acts or considerations in the film include (1) Zuri's decision to risk his life to save T'Challa's when it appeared that Killmonger was going to kill him (harm/welfare considerations), (2) Nakia and Killmonger—albeit through different means—believing that Wakanda should use its resources (distributive justice/fairness) to improve the lives of non-Wakandans (harm/welfare), and (3) T'Challa agreeing to allow Killmonger to challenge him for the throne once he found out he was Wakandan (procedural justice/fairness).

Examples of socio-conventional acts or considerations include (1) naming the land and collectively agreeing (or at least attempting) to live on the land the five tribes inhabited (i.e., acts to enhance group identity and functioning), (2) the establishment—presumably by consensus between four tribes—of a monarchy-based government where the people are governed and protected by one person, (3) the ceremonial battle to select new kings, and (4) the practice of newly-crowned kings to visit the ancestral plane to commune with deceased former kings and Black Panthers to receive leadership guidance. Lastly, personal considerations such as autonomy and personal jurisdiction could have informed Nakia's decisions to resist careers and life paths more oriented towards loyalty to the throne/tradition (e.g., as a member of the Dora Milaje) and to a husband (e.g., as T'Challa's wife), respectively.

In terms of the second general feature suggested by SDT, many of the core issues surrounding the sociomoral conflicts Wakandans experienced in *Black Panther* (2018) can potentially be understood as encompassing interactions between various concepts or domains. The film's overarching debate of isolationism versus interventionism, for example, could be understood through the lens of an inner domain combination, at least with regards to the positions held by T'Challa and Killmonger. In particular, whereas Killmonger's concern for the welfare of others becomes evident in his stance favoring intervention, one could argue that T'Challa's insistence that it is not the Wakandan way to get involved in other countries' affairs may also stem

(at least in part) from welfare considerations. Whereas Killmonger advocates for the sharing of vibranium to alleviate others' suffering, T'Challa might be initially against the idea out of a concern that intervening could lead to undue suffering or making matters worse for Wakandans as well as for those they intend to help. Insofar as the debate could be construed as one between either (1) allocating resources (distributive justice) to improve the welfare of others versus maintaining that of Wakandans' and avoiding potential armed conflicts with other nations or (2) alleviating harm versus avoiding harm, the film's central theme could be viewed as an inner domain combination with moral concepts at the heart of both perspectives on the issue. Given that intervention would require fundamental changes in Wakandan tradition/policy/law, the debate could also be construed within the context of a second order combination, whereby T'Challa's and Killmonger's positions on whether or not the tradition/policy/law should be changed have moral implications affecting harm/welfare.

In addition, one could view the ceremonial battle between T'Challa and Killmonger as highlighting a between-domain interaction when examining the reactions of Okoye and Zuri. Although both appeared visibly uncomfortable when it appeared that Killmonger was going to kill T'Challa, their reactions differed considerably. Whereas Okoye decided to let the battle continue, Zuri decided to disrupt tradition and intervene at the cost of his life. One way to explain their differing reactions is that although both may have acknowledged the conflict between tradition (socio-conventional) and harm (moral) in that moment, Okoye prioritized maintaining tradition and Zuri prioritized saving T'Challa's life. Alternatively, from the perspective of an inner domain interaction, the nature of the conflict could have been one of procedural justice (e.g., allowing the competing claims to the throne to be resolved fairly) versus welfare (saving T'Challa's life).

IMPLICATIONS FOR CIVICS EDUCATION

It has been suggested that the social worlds of children are diverse and varied (Rubin et al., 2006) and commonly include social interactions that are by nature complex and multifaceted (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006; Turiel & Wainryb, 2000; Wainryb, 2004, 2006; Wainryb & Brehl, 2006; Wainryb & Pasupathi, 2015). It is further suggested that in some instances, children's understanding of these situations is also multifaceted, including both the application of multiple concepts to and an appreciation of the unique features of the situations they witness or experience (Helwig, 1997, 1998, 2006; Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001; Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Smetana & Ball, 2019; Smetana et al., 1991). As such, and as the recess examples and research on older children's sociomoral understanding suggest, children bring a wealth of experiences to their learning spaces that can serve as valuable resources when it comes to learning about individuals and societies in the context of citizenship. Part of this rich experience may also include elements of popular culture that examine some of the same sociomoral concepts they use to navigate their everyday social worlds.

After providing a rationale for the focus on Grades 2-5 with respect to civics education, a suggested approach for educators interested in using features of Wakandan society as an aid in creating civics-related learning activities is provided. The general approach highlights the relevant capacities children at each age level may be able to bring to the activities and the relevant features of Wakandan society that educators may find useful to reflect upon when creating those activities. Given the essay's focus on broad capacities or potentialities and the fact that a myriad of factors can contribute to a child demonstrating a given capacity earlier or later than expected, some of the relevant capacities and activities discussed will contain some grade overlap (i.e., part of a suggestion may appear in the discussion of more than one grade).

Grade Choice Rationale and Suggested Approaches for Educators

In an effort to explore these features in *Black Panther* (2018) and apply them to civics education, Grades 2-5 will be the focus for three reasons. First, it appears that beginning in the second grade (approximately age

seven), the recommended scope and sequence for the civics component of grade level expectations for social studies in Washington State (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008) includes learning goals consistent with domain-combinations (e.g., personal preference vs. public safety). Although learning criteria can vary by state and school-type, it is expected that elements of Washington State's learning criteria are broadly consistent with those of other schools. Second, as mentioned above, findings suggest that children seven years old and older have capacities enabling them to (1) consistently distinguish between domains using both evaluative and reasoned criteria (Ardila-Rey & Killen, 2001; Davidson et al., 1983; Hollos et al., 1986; Jambon & Smetana, 2014; Kahn, 1992; Nucci et al., 1996; Nucci & Turiel, 1993) and (2) attempt to coordinate different concepts when trying to understand more complex social phenomena (Helwig, 1998; Helwig & Jasiodedzka, 2001; Helwig & Kim, 1999; Helwig et al., 2008; Nucci & Turiel, 2009; Weston & Turiel, 1980). Third, of the 32 animated superhero shows (created between 1992 and 2017) reviewed by Common Sense Media (<https://commonsensemedia.org/>) since 1990, 28 (87.4%) were recommended for either children ages seven and older (14 shows; 43.7%) or eight and older (14 shows; 43.7%). The shows were identified through a search performed by the author. The discussion ends at Grade 5 due to the fact that at the time of writing the essay, school districts in Washington State were in the process of transitioning Grade 6 into middle school.

Given concerns related to the prominence of violence in superhero media and its potential influences on children (e.g., Coyne et al., 2017; Mares & Woodard, 2005; Wilson et al., 2002) and potential variability with regards to who may or may not have seen the film, the hope is that the following suggestions provide the means for educators to consider how a popular culture product like *Black Panther* (2018) might inform their creation of civics-related learning activities without requiring their students to view the film. First, educators can, in a way that protects students' anonymity, ask their students to submit descriptions of the kinds of everyday conflicts or disagreements they experience with peers and adults. After roughly categorizing these descriptions according to the moral, socio-conventional, and/or personal domain features as conceptualized by SDT, educators can watch the film and take notes on the conflicts or disagreements experienced by Wakandans that may have similar domain features as the descriptions provided by their students. Lastly, after having identified examples of congruence between their students' conflicts and disagreements and those portrayed in the film, educators can begin brainstorming potential hypothetical scenarios and activities related to establishing and maintaining a community or society that is consistent with some civics-related learning outcomes. The next sections will briefly discuss some civics-related capacities for current and soon-to-be educators to potentially keep in mind during this activity-generating process, along with some accompanying activities.

Second Grade

In the second grade (approximately seven years of age), students are expected to begin exploring how concepts related to community, public/common goods, and individuals may be related. To these ends, some examples listed in the Grade Level Expectations (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008) include understanding the effects of following (or not following) park rules and traffic laws on the common good and neighborhoods respectively. From an SDT perspective (Smetana, 1983; Turiel, 1983), these examples suggest second-order combinations, whereby socio-conventional acts (e.g., following or not following rules or laws) have potential moral (e.g., individual and public safety) and/or personal (e.g., recreational enjoyment) implications.

As discussed above, potential second order combinations are also implicated in certain features of Wakandan society. Examples include the use of vibranium (e.g., changes in law/policy regarding its use have implications for the safety of both Wakandans and non-Wakandans) and ability-enhancing herbs (following or not following the cultural tradition of being stripped of the herb prior to battle entailing fairness and welfare implications for the opponent). In terms of second-order combinations involving socio-conventional acts and moral implications, educators could encourage second graders to consider the regulatory and consistent

nature by which certain laws in their neighborhoods and communities are followed (e.g., traffic and loitering), and the potential ways these observed social patterns affect others.

For moral considerations, the focus could be on the potential harm caused by people who disobey traffic laws as well as the harm that is prevented by those who follow these laws. For personal considerations, the focus could be on the effects related to how disobeying park rules can negatively affect the kinds of recreational activities children can engage in in their neighborhoods (e.g., reckless driving could make it more dangerous to play outside) and parks (e.g., loitering and damaging park property can take certain recreational activities off the table). These kinds of emphases (e.g., socio-conventional matters via observed regularities in social behavior, moral matters via harm/welfare considerations, and personal matters via recreational activities) are consistent with Nucci's (2009) characterization of second-graders' general understanding of socio-conventional, moral, and personal acts (see also Turiel, 1983).

Third Grade

A key goal in third grade (approximately eight years of age) includes the fostering of an understanding of a community that appreciates unity and diversity. Potential curricular examples include understanding the ways communities benefit from diversity with regards to differing viewpoints, cultural perspectives, and customs (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008). This educational goal is consistent with children's sociomoral development in at least two respects. One is with regards to the diverse nature of social interaction and the relevant concepts used to make sense of those interactions (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2006; Turiel & Wainryb, 2000; Wainryb, 2004, 2006). The other pertains to the notion that around third grade (approximately age eight), children are—albeit in a relatively limited manner—attending to some contextual features of social situations (Nucci, 2009).

Along these lines, one potential avenue for educators to help facilitate third graders' understanding of the relationship between community, unity, and diversity is to provide opportunities for them to explore different ways individuals can be generally unified (e.g., in their agreement both implicitly or explicitly to live together in community), yet disagree with each other on certain issues. This increased focus on the co-existence of agreements and disagreements within a community could be viewed as a way for students to begin to examine the bases of civil disagreements on various issues relevant to communities in the form of diverse domain interactions. In *Wakanda*, some examples of the co-existence of agreements and disagreements include the ways that a shared belief of the importance of Wakandan society (e.g., its values, resources, and tradition) was reflected in its citizens' disagreements over the use of vibranium, the role of Wakanda in the affairs of other countries, and the rules governing the ceremonial battle.

As an example of a learning activity, students can be given the responsibility of creating safety laws for a hypothetical community whose members hold diverse views on the nature of punishment. This could provide opportunities for students to engage with various perspectives as they pertain to the relationship between harm (e.g., resulting from ignoring safety laws) and justice (e.g., what punishment is appropriate given the nature of the harm caused by the violation of that particular law). Educators can modify such an activity to ensure diverse viewpoints are represented by community members, and diverse influences (e.g., cultural tradition, religion, family values, etc.) on these viewpoints are brought to bear on community decisions.

Within the same community where third graders are tasked with creating safety laws, they could also be tasked with establishing common rules for certain recreational games to be played in schools within the community. Within this activity, educators could encourage students to try to anticipate and resolve potential conflicts between (1) game rules and harm/welfare considerations (e.g., trying to regulate the nature and amount of physical activity so participants are less likely to get hurt) and/or (2) game rules and justice/welfare considerations (e.g., selecting teams and captains in a fair manner; accounting for diversity in physical abilities). In addition to students sharing diverse perspectives on what constitutes fair game rules, the activity might elicit

their more general understandings of social conventions around this age, which includes a relative devaluing of social conventions compared to earlier ages (Turiel, 1983; Nucci, 2009). Moreover, such activities can build on third graders' emerging capacities related to the personal/psychological domain (e.g., construing of the self as including a personality), and the moral domain (e.g., an increased emphasis on equality) (Nucci, 2009).

Fourth Grade

In the fourth grade (approximately nine years of age), there should be an emphasis on the understanding of personal (human) rights/civil liberties, with examples including the right to life, liberty, property, due process, freedom of thought, freedom of speech, and freedom of religion. Moreover, students' emerging understanding of these concepts should occur in relation to an appreciation of how these concepts can inform evaluations of laws and policies. They are also expected to critique the effectiveness of a legal ban on smoking in public places in Washington State from the perspective of promoting the right to life (RCW 70.160.030; Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008). It is therefore expected that by the fourth grade, students should begin to (more) critically examine some of the "contracts" between individuals and their regulatory institutions. Given the potential socio-conventional (laws, policies) and moral (procedural justice, rights/civil liberties) considerations embedded in these learning objectives, coupled with the suggestion (Helwig, 1997, 1998) that the understanding of rights as a moral issue has its origins in the understanding of rights as a personal matter (e.g., autonomy and choice), fourth graders are generally expected to be able to not only distinguish between domains, but also to consider ways these domains inform their evaluation of laws and policies governing social interactions.

Further, in addition to a tendency at this age to construe conventions as not very important due to a greater awareness of inconsistencies and exceptions regarding whether conventions are followed or enforced (Nucci, 2009; Turiel, 1983), findings also suggest that by the age of nine, children should demonstrate the ability to evaluate laws or authority dictates using diverse moral criteria. Examples include evaluating laws or authority commands/sanctions based on their perceived likelihood of yielding outcomes that (1) are just/fair (Prencipe & Helwig, 2002; Wainryb, 1995), (2) promote general welfare (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001), and (3) do not infringe on individuals' civil liberties (Prencipe & Helwig, 2002). In addition, they should be able to differentiate between governmental systems using fairness criteria by viewing democratic systems of government (e.g., representative democracy, direct democracy, and consensus-based democracy) as more fair than non-democratic ones (e.g., oligarchy and meritocracy). These distinctions should also become increasingly informed by procedural justice related concerns, such as the process by which decisions are made within each system (Helwig, 1998).

The ability of fourth graders to evaluate socio-conventional features of societies using moral criteria may be explored through activities geared towards examinations of the kinds of laws, policies, and customs that parallel some of the features of Wakandan society. One kind of activity may be geared towards students discussing the pros and cons and evaluating the fairness of a monarchy based system of government in comparison to a democratic one. Such an activity could also include a description of a society run by the former type of government that includes an interpersonal competition to select the king that is similar to the ceremonial battle used in Wakanda. The activity could further have students engage with other features associated with monarchies and an important aspect of Wakandan society: lineage and heritage. In addition to evaluating laws and government systems for the purpose of comparing such systems, students could also explore and evaluate the relationship between lineage, heritage, and government leadership within each system of government. Insofar as these systems of government vary regarding this relationship, students can explore the potential pros and cons of this variance in ways that implicate the kinds of domain interactions relevant to an evaluation of a ban on an act as socially-relevant as smoking.

Fifth Grade

Moving towards a more abstract and elaborate understanding of social life that goes beyond communities, the learning goals for fifth graders (approximately ten years of age) emphasize an understanding of factors related to informed civic participation within a democratic society. An example of a related outcome includes students' ability to examine the relationship between censorship and freedom of speech (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008). According to Nucci (2009), one of the major advances that emerge around the age of 10 occurs in the socio-conventional domain. Concepts related to social order and hierarchy generally become more important to 10-year-olds' understanding of the nature and purpose of conventions (e.g., Midgette et al., 2016; Nucci, 2009; Turiel, 1983).

One way to incorporate features of Wakandan society could be to have fifth graders explore intersections between moral (e.g., fairness, freedom of speech), socio-conventional (e.g., established rules, norms) and personal (e.g., individuals' abilities to and desire for civic participation) concepts through activities centered around an analysis of a hypothetical society's core decision-making process used in the creation of laws and/or the election of government officials. Such activities can enable students to explore the role of procedural justice in group activities. Given the unique features of the ceremonial battle (e.g., any Wakandan can participate, prohibition against using the enhancement herb, the use of fighting ability as a criteria for leadership, etc.) and its importance in the film, educators may want to consider incorporating some of the battle's features into their activities.

The connection between procedural justice and everyday activities can then be used to discuss issues pertaining to what it means for individuals to engage in civic participation. One feature of civic participation related to procedural justice that has been examined in children, and thus may prove useful for the present discussion, is decision making. For instance, 10-year-olds prioritize democratic systems of government over non-democratic ones, and justify their preferences by appealing to considerations related to procedural justice; namely, giving people a voice in governmental processes and allowing them to express their concerns about the nature of decisions (e.g., good/just or bad/unjust) that could potentially result from various democratic systems (Helwig, 1998). They have also been found to endorse the teaching of democratic values in schools at a higher rate than 8-year-olds (Prencipe & Helwig, 2002) and discriminate between decision-making procedures in group activities with respect to both the nature of the activity and the social context in which the activity takes place (Helwig & Kim, 1999).

A second feature of civic participation related to procedural justice pertains to the relationship between individuals and authorities or laws. Findings on 10-year-olds' understanding of these relationships may be further suggestive of their capacities in the realm of procedural justice. One concept 10-year-old students appear to have an abstract understanding of that is relevant to the present discussion is freedom of speech. Helwig (1998) found that although younger and older children generally endorsed free speech, an age trend emerged. Compared to first graders (6-year-olds), fifth graders (10-year-olds) were more likely to endorse freedom of speech, negatively evaluate laws restricting free speech, and endorse an individual's decision to engage in free speech, even when doing so meant breaking the law (Helwig, 1998). Fifth graders also appear to distinguish between (1) socially beneficial laws, (2) socially beneficial laws in conflict with individual autonomy, and (3) unjust laws better than first graders do (Helwig & Jasiobedzka, 2001).

CONCLUSION

With its emphasis on domain distinctions, diverse social and domain-related interactions, and coordination, SDT provides a useful lens to examine *Black Panther* (2018) as a potential tool for primary school educators in two respects. For one, SDT provides a framework by which broad, conceptual parallels can

be drawn between situations common to children's social worlds, the kinds children are expected to engage in and understand through their civics education, and those at the heart of the conflicts and disagreements experienced by Wakandan citizens. Second, SDT assumes children are active participants in their social worlds, capable of reasoning in a principled manner, and at times demonstrating an awareness of the unique features of varying situations (Smetana, 1983, 2006; Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2014; Wainryb, 2004, 2006). Thus, events in the film can potentially provide the basis for activities consistent with some civics-oriented learning objectives within the social studies curriculum. Moreover, it has been argued that this could be done in a way that does not require students to watch the film or to engage with its (more) violent elements.

Given the prevalence of superhero media and the general consistency between (1) increasing sociomoral capacities (as implicated in SDT-related findings) on the one hand and (2) the broadening of social life contexts inherent within the Washington State's Grade Level Expectations for Social Studies (e.g., living in communities to living in a democratic societies) (Superintendent of Public Instruction, 2008) on the other, films like *Black Panther* (2018) that readily portray characters expressing diverse viewpoints may assist educators in their goals of fostering the development of thoughtful, considerate, and respectful citizens. But even if the film is not employed to these ends, Nucci (2009) suggests it would behoove educators concerned about the current and future iterations of civic life to carefully attend to children's understanding of the relations and distinctions between sociomoral concepts, the ways these concepts interact in different areas of social life, and the role(s) their understanding of situational features (e.g., effects of actions on others) may play in their sociomoral judgments.

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Guiding Students Down that “Old Town Road:” Writing Pedagogy, Relatability and the Sitch

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ABSTRACT

This study draws on media literacy to suggest pedagogical techniques that aim to combat boredom and enhance student engagement in freshman writing classes. Students often complain they cannot relate to course work; they maintain that course materials do not connect to their real lives and are therefore uninteresting. Because writing classes can serve as an introduction to academic discourse and skillful writing promotes academic success, negative attitudes about writing matter. Instructors craft courses to achieve learning outcomes but also to foster the habits of mind effective writing demands. I contend that discussing and writing about timely, controversial topics from students’ social media feeds teaches them to identify the complex power structures at play in the materials they do find pertinent. Students gain confidence by demonstrating adept understandings of contentious issues and, in fostering this process, instructors neutralize the relatability problem by allowing students to choose the topics they deem compelling.

Keywords: Freshman writing, media literacy, student engagement, lesson plans, social media, pedagogical techniques

Furtive texting, whispered chatting, errant napping: these are the classroom behaviors of bored students, and most writing instructors have had the disagreeable experience of failing to coax them into group conversation. Indeed, engaging indifferent undergrads in meaningful class discussions can present a significant hurdle to effective teaching. This holds especially true in freshman writing courses, where most American college students first encounter the complexity of academic discourse. Fortunately, pedagogical practices constructed with the analysis of popular culture in mind can catalyze student participation. However, in creating lesson plans, writing instructors face the challenge of identifying which materials work best to promote class conversation and aid the achievement of course learning outcomes (Sellnow 4). To this end, instructors would do well to draw on the educational benefits of critical media literacy in their pedagogical planning: “more than simply guiding how students read and interpret the texts they encounter, critical media literacy pedagogy pushes to illuminate the underlying power structures that are a part of every media text” (Garcia, et al. 109). By examining power structure dynamics and how they inform texts, students learn “to sift through the reams of information that bombard them on a daily basis and identify spin, half-truths, and outright lies” (Garcia, et al. 109). For this reason, the ideal lesson has students analyzing the implications of obfuscation in texts they know well and genuinely want to explore. While these factors are not necessarily prerequisites for the purposes of selection, they can influence student enthusiasm, or what students identify as a text’s ‘relatability,’ and therefore affect participation and learning.

RELATABILITY AND THE SITCH

Students tell us time and again they want course material they can ‘relate’ to, and though we intuit what they mean by this, we are frequently baffled by how to make it happen. Often instructors avoid the relatability issue by side-stepping it altogether and analyzing the media they like. This approach, though legitimate and usually fruitful, has its limitations. Even though *Hulu’s* “The Handmaid’s Tale” and *Showtime’s* “The Chi” might enthrall instructors and rack up record viewership, student reception, if they’ve never heard of these programs, can be chilly or worse, disdainful if they’ve rejected the shows altogether. One strategy for tackling the relatability conundrum involves reframing the dynamic between texts and students. What if instead of introducing texts we find compelling, we introduce timely *contexts* first? What if we encourage our students to mine social media and let the latest flare-up, the “sitch,” drive text selection? The *Urban Dictionary* defines “sitch” as “short for situation.” This would include trending, usually controversial topics inundating social media. Our students know them well. By enlisting a sitch for class discussions we meet students where they are *now* as they navigate trending topics in real time. Constant, updated feeds from *Instagram*, *Reddit*, *Snapchat News* and the like swell into tsunamis of information that flood students’ social media and thereby provide instructors with a sea of topics and texts to consider. Discussing trendy sitches in class allows students to “access, analyze, evaluate, and communicate information in a variety of forms within print and non-print media” (Garcia, et al. 112), all critical thinking activities crucial to writing instructors’ learning outcomes. Debates about sitches, when well-handled, can offer entree to these educational goals.

Take for example the recent debate over the GameStop short squeeze (“Controversy over GameStop’s Stock”). This dispute provides a perfect illustration of a sitch ripe for classroom consideration. Students are able to speak candidly about the purpose of the coordinated stock buying blitz executed via the aptly named *Robinhood* trading platform (DeNisco Rayome 2021). Here, flying in the face of stock market norms, bands of young, small-time buyers drove up a floundering company’s stock price for the express purpose of undercutting major hedge funds’ short positions (“Melvin Capital and the Road to Ruin”). Indeed, the scrappy investors, which included many high school and college students who bought twenty or fifty dollars-worth of shares, succeeded in causing Melvin Capital to lose half of its thirteen-billion-dollar fund (“Controversy

over GameStop Stock”). This stitch can allow students to examine where and how the sabotage plan was hatched (on the sub-*Reddit* forum “r/WallStreetBets”) and what that online coordination signifies for its users. Student conversations might explore the varied motivations for day-trading investors to purchase and hold their GameStop stocks with “diamond hands.” These include making quick fortunes, also known as getting the “tendies,” ‘sticking it’ to Wall Street hedge fund operators; and avenging their parents’ 2008 economic losses. Jacob Hall, a Generation Z freshman college student, offered his take on the brouhaha:

People my age have accepted they’re never going to be financially secure, and Covid had most of us unemployed and at home. The world is so insane now that we said ‘screw it’ and threw the little money we had in the market expecting to probably lose it all, knowing we’ll never get the wealth the top ten percent have. Our generation and the Millennials are in the grip of existential fear. We are adopting nihilism and apathy due to the chaos of the world and uncertainty of the future. The insanity of GameStop is, I guess, a metaphor for this or an ironic grand gesture. Also, this may sound weird, but there’s a strong sense of community in all of us little guys banding together. (Hall 2021)

For Hall and many of his peers, the GameStop sitch functions as a *cri de coeur*, a passionate protest, for a generation alienated and angry about a bleak future with scant chance for the financial security Boomers claimed as their birthright. Students can be prompted to write about this subject, because it’s probable they or someone they know invested a few dollars in the soaring stock; many have skin in the game and for Gen Z, the personal is financial (Anderson 2021). With this in mind, instructors can capitalize (pun intended) on the thrill and anxiety permeating the GameStop sitch to drive class discussions which, in turn, will generate intriguing research and writing assignments.

SITCH HUNTING

The ubiquitous nature of sitches make them incredibly useful pedagogical tools. Recent controversies involving musicians can lend themselves to lively class discussions and therefore make excellent sitch choices. For instance, regardless of musical tastes, the vast majority of students will probably have opinions, albeit perhaps uninformed, about the consumption and value of Michael Jackson and R Kelly’s music in relation to their alleged crimes (Mahdawi and Donegan 2019). To be sure, their responses might be kneejerk in nature, ranging anywhere from he’s a victim and I’m always going to listen to his music to he’s an evil person and no one should ever play his music again. Such judgments can mark points of entry for students to practice critical thinking via class conversation. Moreover, interrogating multiple attitudes pushes students “to explore difficult-to-see ideologies and connections between power and information” (Garcia et al. 112). Hence, letting students identify and discuss *why* they find certain sitches relatable to them as individuals or as group members is a valuable activity in and of itself, because, as I’ve found in my classrooms, a sitch’s pedagogical usefulness is predicated on contentious views touching on race, class, gender, privilege and power.

The beauty of sitches is that students can readily identify them and track their development in real time. In fact, given social media’s omnipresence, many instructors would say their students know more about trending topics than they do. That said, instructors can still set parameters to frame the hunt. Designating topics such as sports, music or movies challenges students to limit the scope of material to explore and thereby initiate more targeted discussions. For example, in fall of 2017, I taught two sections of freshmen writing. Both classes were populated with first generation African-American and Latinx students. Early in the semester we explored the dynamic between writer and audience and how a writer’s understanding of their audience helps them craft ways to best relay their message. I asked students to think of a sports-related topic connected to audience reception that personally resonated with them. After consideration, two students suggested we

discuss the race-based media storm surrounding the NFL player Colin Kaepernick and his taking a knee at games during the national anthem (Wyche 2016). They were certain they understood the athlete's message which Kaepernick had made clear in the press: "I am not going to stand up to show pride in a flag for a country that oppresses black people and people of color" (qtd. in Wyche 2016). The majority of my students readily identified Kaepernick's pronouncement as valid and important, but then they had to work more assiduously to parse different audiences' reception of that message.

One audience they considered was Donald Trump and his indignant response to Kaepernick's protest (Graham 2017). Some students calculated his outrage was probably intended to gain political points with his base. They also discussed the uproar among Americans like Kurt Schlichter, a combat veteran who claimed Kaepernick was targeting veterans: "He knows what this [the national anthem] means to us. He knows how insulting it is" (qtd. in Puri 2018). Students examined why Schlichter believed Kaepernick's act dishonored his service, and because a cohort of students had family members in the military, a few agreed with Schlichter's indictment. They also considered how Schlichter's complaint was roundly rejected by a large faction of veterans who supported Kaepernick (Szoldra and Woody 2017). Vets like Benjamin Starks, retired from both the US Navy and the US Army Reserve, maintained that "Kaepernick is exercising his constitutional right, and I'm glad that he's doing it" (quoted in Szoldra and Woody 2017). Stark and his likeminded soldiers identified freedom of speech as the issue at stake in the controversy. Through our conversations, students explored the Kaepernick sitch to investigate how the complex intersection of political spin, national identity, and freedom of speech informed an audience's reception to the football player's protest. I found that the Kaepernick sitch stimulated productive class discussions, because students were able to dig deep to consider how and why audiences play a role in determining a message's meaning. Successful sitch studies can interrogate familiar institutions like the NFL and the current political environment to contextualize and tease out meaning swirling in the media frenzy. Moreover, no one complained to me of being bored!

THE "OLD TOWN ROAD" SITCH

To illustrate this practice in finer detail, let me now offer a case study demonstrating how scrutinizing a sitch can enrich the writing classroom. A recent sitch involves Lil Nas X, a twenty-two-year-old rapper from Atlanta whose hit song, "Old Town Road," has been a hot button topic since its release in December of 2018 (Frank 2019). After remaining seventeen weeks at the top of the charts, the track's influence showed no sign of abating at the end of 2019 (Fortin 2019). Positioned in the crossover genre mash of country and hip hop, also known as hick hop, Nas X's single was a pop success even as it raised hackles on the country music scene (Chow 2019). Billboard charts refused to acknowledge the track and some country stations even declined to air "Old Town Road" (Frank 2019). Because Lil Nas X is both African-American and gay, charges of racism and homophobia followed, forcing many country, hip hop and pop fans to reevaluate their understandings of race, sexuality and the taxonomies of genre (Jacobs 2019). Musicians soon stepped into the fray to redress the snubbing of Nas X's hit. Billy Ray Cyrus, a well-known white country singer, sprang to Nas X's defense and the two artists produced a remix of Nas X's music video (Nas X 2019).

Nas X's remixed video soared in popularity and the track finally received the public respect it deserved. The "Old Town Road" remix is the first and longest running hick hop song ever featured in Billboard's "The Hot 100" hits (Chow 2019). Tongue in cheek, the video tackles the race and genre issue head on, even as Cyrus's imprimatur functions to tamp down the controversy. In fact, at the start of the video, Cyrus tells Nas X, "you're with me this time, everything's gonna be alright" (Nas X 2019). But Cyrus's involvement with Nas X, his making everything alright, appears to come at a cost. Cyrus often gets first billing in the video and frequently sings lead vocals in the refrain or hook, "the catchy part of a song that draws in the listener" (*Urban Dictionary* 2021). Nas X also adds a new framing device to this video, one that gestures to how only

an exceptional Black man can succeed in this music genre. The video opens with an all-Black posse, featuring Chris Rock as its sheriff, in a horse race to capture Nas X who holds a large sack of money. Rock stops the chase and lets Nas X go, telling his deputies, “when you see a Black man on horseback goin’ that fast, you just gotta let him fly” (Nas X 2019). Nas X rides hard till he stumbles across Cyrus’s ranch and at this point in the story the song begins. To close the frame, the posse returns at the end of the video where Rock declares with admiration, “I’ve never seen nothing goin’ that fast in my life” (Nas X 2019). The result is a video rich for analysis, because it raises as many questions about race, power and genre as it attempts to answer.

USING A SITCH IN LESSON PLANS

Students have a lot to unpack from the “Old Town Road” sitch. For example, Nas X’s song lyrics and different iterations of his music video present opportunities to teach elements of the rhetorical situation by drawing on aspects of critical media literacy. Author, purpose, media, stance, audience and genre *all* function as flashpoints in the Nas X controversy, but for the purposes of this piece, let’s look specifically at genre. A close look at the lyrics prompts students to think about how they define genre in the context of Nas X’s chosen mediums and how those definitions are not neatly delineated when viewed through a critical lens. A simple introductory exercise to demonstrate this might have students listing aloud key items, the words they associate with country songs, and next identifying those features in the “Old Town Road” lyrics, as in lines 5-8:

I got the horses in the back
Horse tack is attached
Hat is matte black
Got the boots that’s black to match (qtd. in Silver)

Country music’s staple images are explicit here in references to “horses,” “tack,” “black hats” and “boots.” Some students may not know the word “tack,” but this is easily remedied with a quick google search which will show that “tack” means equestrian equipment, articles such as saddles, bridles and reins (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary* 2021). Indeed, Nas X’s use of “tack” emphasizes the speaker’s credibility while reinforcing generic expectations about country lyric content. Yet, despite the song’s country tropes, many country music fans resisted associating it with the genre. One possible reason for this rejection lies in the track’s transition from traditional country tropes to others associated with hip hop (Chow 2019). We see this in the lines 17-24:

Ridin’ on a tractor
Lean all in my bladder
Cheated on my baby
You can go and ask her
My life is a movie
Bull ridin’ and boobies
Cowboy hat from Gucci
Wrangler on my booty (qtd. in Silver)

Here the class can identify factors that give country fans pause. For instance, words such as “boobies” and “booty” point to the overt sexuality often heard in hip hop lyrics and references to “Gucci” and “Wrangler” mirror the brand name-dropping also associated with the genre (Gallagher 2019). A free writing exercise might include exploring the connotative tension found in Nas X’s word choice and how diction serves as an important principle of music classification.

This free write, in turn, can prime students to consider the remix video’s visuals as strategically paired to the song’s lyrics and how this particular pairing foments controversy. Perhaps more important, such writing

tasks oblige students to contend with *how* and *why* racial stereotypes are affixed to genre, and how generic conventions manifest differently in different mediums. For instance, Nas X's original song and video show him acting as the protagonist of his story and singing all his lyrics alone. In this role his lyrical refrain has implications that are distinct from Cyrus's in the remix video. In the latter, both men sing the following:

Yeah, I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more
I'm gonna take my horse to the old town road
I'm gonna ride 'til I can't no more (qtd. In Silver)

When Nas X sings these lines, his cadence intones weariness but also urgency; he's fleeing from something threatening, in this case a posse. This anxiety is affirmed by Chris Rock's Sheriff character who specifically describes Nas X as a Black man running from law enforcement at top speed (Nas X 2019). Unlike Nas X, when Cyrus sings the same lyrics, the tone and import of the message appear different. Cyrus's vocals sound more relaxed; they ring of a man confidently striking out toward a new horizon. Both Cyrus's actual singing and the visual of his singing lack the urgency found in Nas X's. This fact is reinforced in the video when we see Nas X riding alone at full gallop while, in contrast, Cyrus calmly croons on stage to an adoring white audience (Nas X 2019). This juxtaposition might be interpreted as signaling how an artist's race can affect country fans' acceptance of his music in "their" genre; in Nas X's rendition, the Black man flees while the white man revels.

Nas X's remix video also plays with hick-hop's racial implications when his character line dances with older, white country music fans. The scene appears to portray the Black cowboy as an anomaly in their midst and, though played for humor, situates the singer as an outsider. In contrast, his interactions with Black characters show him at ease in their company. Students will likely note that in this video Nas X also engages with hip hop dancing and the Black community. His character rides through a Black neighborhood in full cowboy regalia, and Black folks stare at him in shock and amusement. He pairs this interaction with lyrics that draw on hip hop's brand name-dropping. As he sings and the scene progresses, a girl breaks into dance, people relax and children play with his horse. The episode ends with Nas X being embraced and accepted by the Black community. Though Nas X dances and sings with Cyrus's white country music crowd, it's ultimately the Black hip hop community that reflexively offers him safety and support. Hence, it is the shifting dynamic between lyric, image and singer along with the merging of two mediums and genres that make Nas X's art so wonderfully complex. And the complexity at the heart of the "Old Town Road" sitch can provide instructors with meaningful material to teach students the value of analyzing controversial topics, topics that do in fact relate to their real lives.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In all their messy, provocative complexity, sitch materials afford writing instructors a strategy to tackle the relatability issue writing students cite as hindering their engagement in course work. Teaching controversy is nothing new for most college instructors; the practice can be crucial to promoting critical thinking. Developing a pedagogy that pays keen attention to critical media literacy and therefore to our choice of what, when and how to teach controversies can benefit students greatly when we take into account their desire to connect personally with the material they study. I have found this is especially true for anxious freshmen adjusting to the new modes of writing that college demands. In my experience, employing a sitch can work because students are usually comfortable discussing and writing about subjects which they believe they have a kind of mastery over, and indeed instructors can make a strong case for student sitch expertise. Familiarity and relatability inspire confidence, something all good writers seek, but when our students struggle by virtue of our pedagogical practices, their texting, chatting and napping are telling us that, in the words of Nas X's

song, "You can't tell me nothing / Can't nobody tell us nothing" (qtd. in Silver 26-27).

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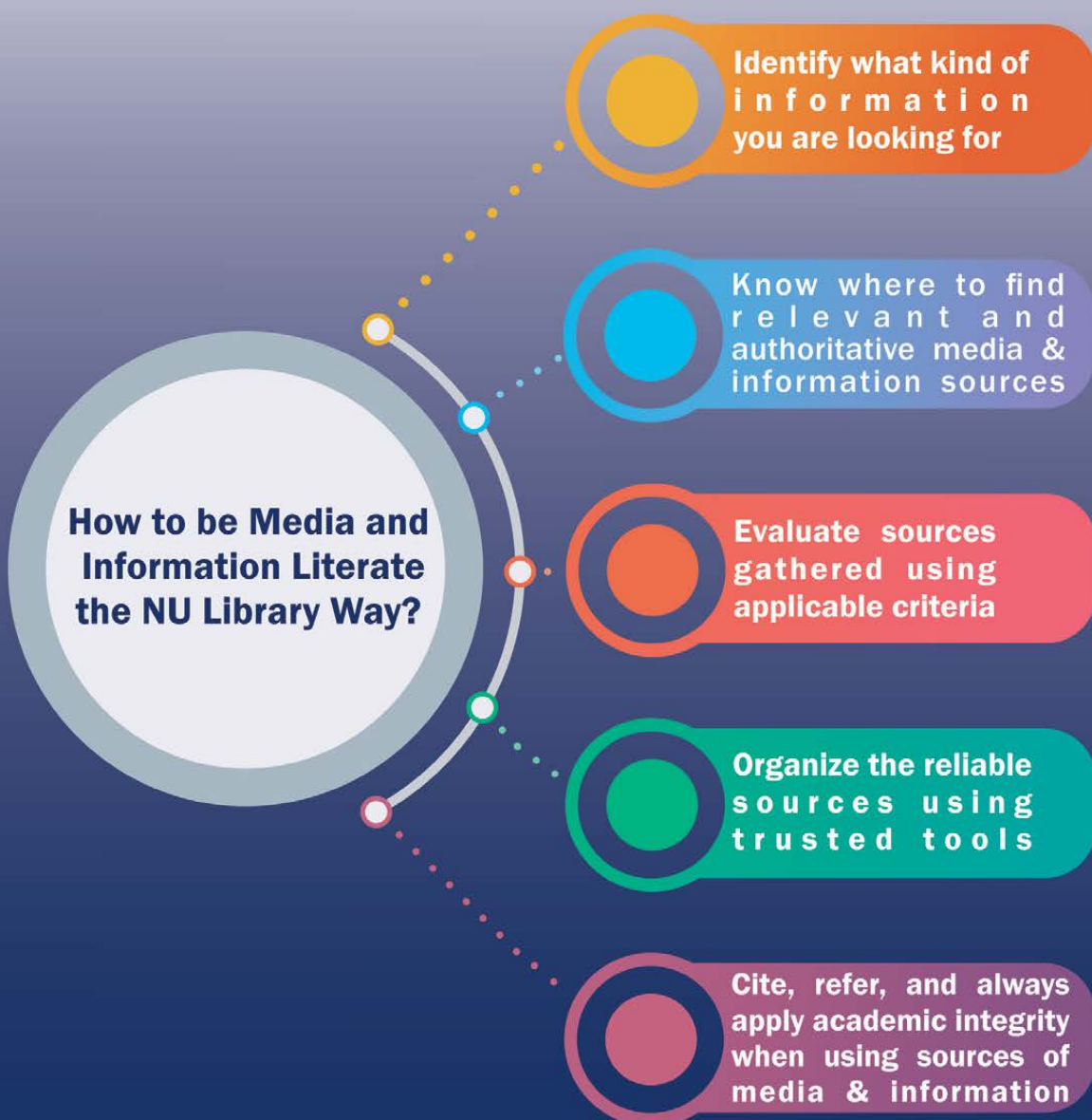
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