Chapter 10
Zombies, Boys, and Videogames: Problems and Possibilities in an Assessment Culture

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Introduction

Zombies. Flesh-eating, grunting and moaning zombies. In the AMC (American Movie Classics) original series, which is based on Robert Kirkman's correspondingly titled comics, *The Walking Dead*, zombies are the undead—humans who have died and come back to life in the form of decaying, yet 'living' bodies that feed on live flesh. They are responsive to basic stimuli—sound, smell, light—but their movement is limited to walking and running (e.g., they cannot jump and rarely can they climb). These zombies add an air of fear and hysteria to the television show, but the zombies are not the focal point; rather, the post-apocalyptic behavior of remaining mankind raises questions about the relationship between the survival of individuals and that of larger society. Changed by the new reality, humans are often more dangerous than the predictable zombies; humanity and kindness are tentative and often are in abeyance, especially when contexts shift quickly. Further, some television critics believe that "what has struck the biggest chord is its raising of theological questions and how it engages in a continuous discussion about human dignity, our fears of death and desecration, our need, or not, for some sort of transcendent reality, and the importance of community" (Blundell 2013, para. 11). Continuing the ethics-questioning theme, Telltale's videogame version, *The Walking Dead*, confronts players with decisions that require one to contemplate personal safety versus the good of the community.

In the Microsoft/Mojang videogame, *Minecraft*, zombies are also a threatening component, as they can sneak up on a player and cause his/her short-lived demise; once attacked, the player then re-spawns and appears in another, often unfamiliar

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part of the *Minecraft* world, and the player—often frustrated—needs to find his/her way back to familiar ground. As in *The Walking Dead*, the *Minecraft* zombies are fairly uncomplicated and predictable, and players can work together to defeat them. Though *Minecraft* is an 'open world' game, or one that provides players relative freedom to shape the space and play as they desire, the zombies are imposed by the computer program (e.g., the player cannot change that option) in specific game modes and levels. Though players are not faced with the same complex ethical decisions presented in *The Walking Dead*, *Minecraft* gameplay calls attention to the interjection of obstacles that often complicate, stymie, and/or derail game play. Looking across these two examples of zombies, one can see how they present a challenge to game players—gamers must remain hyper-vigilant of their presence and must work to eliminate the zombies as a means to maintain order and continue onward as planned. Ultimately, if players are attacked by a zombie, their 'life' in the game is re-routed, and, in the show, this transformation results in people becoming soulless creatures.

In many ways, the zombie seems to be a suitable trope for the challenges students, teachers, and parents may face as they confront and respond to imposed standards and curricula. More specifically, this chapter extends the zombie metaphor to examine the challenges two adolescent male learners and their mother faced as their New York public middle and high schools adopted national standards and imposed curricular modifications. Through the perspective of the stakeholders (the two students and their mother), assessment-driven changes ironically challenged good pedagogy and generated hysteria. In light of the qualitative data, this chapter suggests that videogames can provide a model for productive, collaborative and creative change that promises to be relevant and meaningful to educators and students.

An Assessment Culture

PISA,[1] TIMMS,[2] and NAEP,[3] may vary in scope and content, but they are part of the alphabet soup of assessment surveys that help countries determine their global ranking and (re)consider educational standards. Across international waters and continents, national curricula may have different forms and implementation plans, but they all use similar language that points to meeting the needs of students and creating more enriched educational experiences. Nonetheless, national curricula impact content delivery, and, like learning, curricular reform is a process. In what follows is a brief overview of the national curricular standards in England, Australia, and the United States. What is evident across the three is that education is not without its challenges; like a world pervaded by zombies, explicit and implicit

[1] Programme for International Student Assessment.
[2] Trends in Mathematics and Science Study.
[3] National Assessment of Educational Progress.

requirements and benchmarks effect a change. In some cases, requisite content and pedagogical delivery may feed a culture of assessment, but that does not have to create an educational dystopia.

According to England's Department for Education's website, the new national curriculum and assessment reform will offer teachers and students greater flexibility: "the programmes of study within the new National Curriculum (NC) set out expectations at the end of each key stage, and all maintained schools will be free to develop a curriculum relevant to their pupils that teaches this content" (National Curriculum 2014, p. 2). However, there remain "statutory programmes of study and attainment targets," and the new curriculum indicates what subjects need to be taught and what will be assessed. In addition to summarizing some of the changes, including the chronological discussion of history and an increase in Shakespeare literature, a BBC report indicated that some experts have expressed concern that recent changes to the national curriculum "will require children to cover subjects, particularly in maths and science, up to two years earlier than their peers in top-performing nations" (How is the national curriculum changing? 2014, para. 11).

In Australia, a national curriculum "sets consistent national standards to improve learning outcomes for all young Australians. It sets out, through content descriptions and achievement standards, what students should be taught and achieve, as they progress through school" (Australian Curriculum n.d.). This includes, but is not limited to, specific skills and understandings students should demonstrate at the end of a particular unit. According to the Australian government's website, the Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) is responsible for developing, implementing, and assessing the curriculum and resulting student performance, and the website dedicated to the national curriculum features a digital tool, Scootle, that provides teachers resources that are directly aligned with the curriculum. The 2014 Australian Government's *Review of the Australian Curriculum*, included, but was not limited to, recognizing the overcrowded curriculum and recommending curricular restructuring, which would remove and/or make some content optional. Though these changes would be made in the name of the contemporary needs of students, Goldsmith (2014) argued that some changes, such as the removal of media arts as a compulsory subject, are "wrongheaded." He advocated for students to learn how to create, participate, and navigate in a digital culture, suggesting that "rather than being downsized and made an optional extra, media arts should be at the very core of the 21st century Australian Curriculum" (para. 22).

Finally, in the United States, the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are part of an effort to raise the educational prowess of the country: "The standards are internationally benchmarked and backed by evidence showing that students' mastery of them leads to preparedness for higher education and the workforce" (Sloan 2010). In 2009, 47 states (Texas, South Carolina, and Alaska abstained) agreed to adopt national standards for teaching K-12 students, as the standards promised to support academic achievement and success (Forty-Nine States and Territories 2009). However, the introduction and integration of the Common Core Standards has faced mercurial and inconsistent responses from educators, parents, students and critics.

In the United States, many have felt that students are being overly tested, something comedian Louis C.K. addressed when he attacked the test preparation related to the Common Core and the emotional distress children experience (Mead 2014). However, like any debatable topic, the effectiveness and implementation of the Common Core also is met by other perspectives. *Newsweek* reporter Alexander Nazaryan (2014), who wrote in response to Louis C.K.'s comments, believed that the Common Core initiative, still in its nascent stages, cannot aptly be assessed at this point. Though Diane Ravitch agreed that it is too soon to assess the Common Core's efficacy, in her May 2, 2014 blog, *My response to Alexander Nazaryan*, she also called attention to misinformation in the *Newsweek* article—from the inaccurate discussion of teacher evaluation to the incorrect assumption that the unions did not back the initiative. Ravitch, however, did acknowledge that, as Nazaryan noted, the Common Core Initiative has capitalistic benefits, referring to Joanne Weiss's (2011) comment in the *Harvard Business Review* blog that "the adoption of common standards and shared assessments means that education entrepreneurs will enjoy national markets where the best products can be taken to scale."

The purpose in this chapter is not to debate the efficacy of national curricula, like the Common Core, nor is it to expose a nasty truth about national curriculum initiatives. Rather, it is to call attention to the ways the *transition* to a national curriculum, such as the Common Core, and the resultant shifts in classroom culture can have serious residual impact on teachers, students, and parents. Though not generalizable, this case study provides insight into how the implementation of national standards has affected two adolescent male students who attend public school in New York State.

Background Information: Boys, School, and the Common Core

For over 40 years, gender has continued to be a defining marker in literacy achievement in the United States. The National Assessment of Educational Progress's Long-Term Trend Assessment report indicates that for 17- and 13-year-olds, "the score gap between male and female students in 2012 was not significantly different from the score gap in 1971" (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES] 2013). The disparate reading performances of male and female students have been a prevailing concern among researchers and have been the source of reform discussions (Carnegie Corporation of New York's Council on Advancing Adolescent Literacy 2010). Further, research (Conrad-Curry 2011; Stillwell 2010) considers how the gender gap also is reflected in graduation rates, noting "in every American state, boys leave school before graduation at a higher rate than do girls" (Conrad-Curry 2011, p. 3). In many ways, like the zombie behavior, adolescent male reading rates are predictable and problematic for society.

Despite the national efficacy of the Common Core, there are local considerations that need to be explored and addressed. After all, students are facing new forms of

evaluation; according to the Common Core's website (www.corestandards.org), "the new standards also provide a way for teachers to measure student progress throughout the school year and ensure that students are on the pathway to success in their academic careers" (What parents should know 2014, para 3). How students perceive this evaluation and the changes they are subjected to can have unintentional impact on their learning experiences. Those who struggle with the transition may impose predictable obstacles for teachers, especially when teachers' assumptions about academic achievement and placement impact students' feelings about school and success.

This chapter features the schooling experiences of two adolescent males—Kyle, age 15, and Sage, age 12 (all names and identifiers are pseudonyms)—who have been public school students for their entire schooling experience. I attended the same high school as Kyle and Sage's mother, Sloane, and I have been privy to their academic progress since their elementary years. More recently, I offered free tutoring to Kyle and Sage in their home (with their mother present) during the 2013–2014 school year, and I also observed the boys before and after two tutoring sessions. Likewise, their mother, Sloane, who spoke openly about the boys' academic experiences, agreed to a formal interview. With Sloane's permission and Kyle and Sage's assent, I formally interviewed them as well. Finally, the maintenance of field journal jottings (Emerson 1995) and reflective memos (Creswell 2013), have helped to provide robust qualitative descriptions. Though the inclusion of teacher interviews would have helped to clarify, challenge, and/or confirm the overarching considerations noted in this chapter, I was unable to approach the involved teachers without potentially exposing the participants' identities, something that was of particular concern to Sloane and to me. Though they may live in a well-populated suburb (approximately 20,000 people) within 20 miles from New York City, Sloane noted that their town operates "like a small rural town—especially in school, everyone knows everyone and sports are of upmost importance, like in the 80s movie, *All the Right Moves*." And as Sloane described the school culture, a vision of soulless zombies entered the pedagogical picture.

"The System Has Absolutely Failed These Kids!" (Sloane)

Since we began speaking about the Common Core, Sloane emphatically explained that her older son, Kyle, has been subjected to the changing curricular tides and has suffered the consequences of a school system grappling with Common Core implementation. Sloane explained

> My son, who's in ninth grade, came into the school and the teacher herself was extremely stressed out about it. The kids just learned about it [The Common Core] in September…At the beginning, it made a very big difference with the teaching. The teacher pretty much told us at Back to School Night that they [the teachers] have no idea what they're doing [because of the curricular changes] and our children probably will not do well.

According to Sloane, because of the class's continued poor performance, Kyle's math teacher abandoned the changes she had made to address the Common Core and started to teach "mostly regular math." Sloane added that, with a tutor, Kyle improved in math, but she is "not really sure what [work] will be for Common Core and will not be for Common Core because the teachers do not make the parents privy to it."

Sloane has repeatedly noted how uninformed or misinformed she has been, and she has a distinct mistrust in the school system because of teachers' empty promises and irresponsible language. Further, Sloane explained how uncertainty has permeated the school culture: "The kids are completely ignored, and they walk around clueless because there's no guidance. The teachers are so busy themselves trying to figure out their own stuff because the state has mandated now how they're going to learn, what they're going to do, what needs to be done…But no kid learns the same way." Though the Common Core acknowledges the need for differentiation, Sloane perceived the educators' responses as attacks upon her son's learning. Further, she sensed that strategic moves were necessary for survival in a culture that was in a state of transition, seemingly creating (Common Core) zombies.

Meet Kyle

Kyle is a 5′10″ tall, athletic, and social 15-year-old. When I visited his home, often I would find him playing videogames that ranged from first person shooters, such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops* to the open world game, *Minecraft*. When I asked Kyle to tell me about school, excluding his social life, he said he "does not like school… I would say that it's boring. Without like friends or anything? No fun at all." According to Sloane, Kyle "is not a strong reader," and Kyle often explained that reading "is boring; school is boring."

When I tutored Kyle in writing, I found that he had a good recollection of the text he was reading and about which he needed to write an essay. He was able to form an outline and roughly organize his ideas, but, when it came to writing a formal piece, Kyle struggled to elaborate on his critical analyses; rather, he often referred to the events in the book at face value instead of considering symbolic meaning and/or multiple interpretations. However, Kyle was a capable reader who, like all students, would benefit from reading more.

When Kyle was in sixth grade (2010–2011 school year), he was enrolled in a special reading class, one that the guidance counselor wanted to keep him in for seventh grade, which would be in place of a foreign language. Sloane explained that she spoke with the guidance counselor and the reading teacher who "promised that under no circumstances would [Kyle] be forced to take a foreign language until he gets to high school." In other words, if Sloane followed the teacher's and the counselor's expert advice, then Kyle would receive additional support in reading without having to be concerned with the foreign language component in middle school.

However, within months, there were curricular shifts, and the agreement the school had made with Sloane no longer was viable:

> It was seventh grade, the week going into Memorial Day [the last week in May]…that I got a call from the guidance counselor…telling me that the laws have now changed, and [Kyle] cannot graduate eighth grade without a foreign language, and he has to now go into seventh grade [Spanish] rather than eighth grade [Spanish].

Distraught, Sloane explained that she felt betrayed especially since the reading teacher, "who gave me her word…[said] oh well, I don't even think [Kyle] should be taking a language, period, because he can't really read. He will never do well in a foreign language." When Sloane spoke about this event, her eyes welled with tears. Not only did she feel as though the school "abandoned" her child, but also she discerned the lack of confidence the teachers had in Kyle. In the face of unexpected curricular mandates and administrative panic, Kyle had been blindly subjected to a new protocol by an educator who seemingly sacrificed a student to feed the accountability frenzy. Sloane explained that "when you think of the message they sent him, they sent him and myself as a parent, if it wasn't for me being fortunate enough to have a mother and a friend in the school system to know enough about it to help me and understand the rules and the words, then I would have had nothing." Like most survivors in *The Walking Dead*, Sloane needed the support of others to help her navigate the rather challenging and often terrifying terrain.

With guidance from her mother, Sloane approached the administration and she "begged" the interim principal to help her: "I made a deal with her…I would get a private tutor in the school district …They told me that I had to pay the entire summer out of pocket for [the tutor] and that only then would they allow [Kyle] to take Spanish in the eighth grade. So that way he'd be caught up. I had to pay her. She pretty much came once a week. For the entire summer, my son was completely committed to it." In the end, Kyle completed the necessary requirements and he was able to mask the ephemeral deficiency. In fact, because of the tutoring, Kyle is now enrolled in Honors Spanish. However, Kyle was soon to face yet another obstacle when he transitioned to ninth grade.

Additional Issues with Placement

In seventh grade, Kyle scored a 298 on the New York State English Language Arts (ELA) exam, a score that is two points below passing. Though Sloane wanted to 'opt him out' of the ELA exams in eighth grade, she learned from Kyle's teachers and guidance counselor that Kyle's high school schedule would be contingent upon his ELA scores. As if attacked by a zombie in *Minecraft*, Kyle's standardized test scores would have caused him to 're-spawn' in a different space, a class that was not necessarily academically appropriate for him. Though it is supposed to be an extra support, the high school ELA class seemed to be more of a punishment. According to Sloane, "It starts at 7:15 in the morning or it's the last period class. I know kids

who have lost their electives because they were stuck in that class because they got a 298."

Even though Kyle took the ELA exams again in eighth grade and passed with a score well over 300, he continued to be judged by his seventh grade score, something Sloane said she actively fought to counter:

> The school comes in with a failing attitude. [Kyle] struck out before he even had a chance to bat. They told me that if I opted him out of the ELA in eighth grade, they would go by the score of 298. I said 'I'm going to have him take the ELA in eighth grade so he can waive his score' because the state would mandate him to take this [remedial] ELA class in ninth grade [in lieu of an elective] even though they don't have to take the ELA exams in high school. So when he was taking his ELA [exam] in eighth grade, the guidance counselor called me up and told me that they're making the high school schedule, and they're still going to go by his seventh grade score, but if he does well enough, then they will pull him from the [remedial] class in ninth grade. And I fought the school and I said absolutely not. If he does not do well on the eighth grade score, then he could go into the class. If he does well on it, I am not going to take away his elective. He is to be given the two electives to begin with. And I only knew this because I am friendly with the guidance counselor. I got lucky. Most of the other parents did not have a choice, and their children had to go straight into the remedial class.

As in *The Walking Dead*, the context seemed to constantly change, and moving forward was precarious and difficult without the help others. What's more, there were so many unknowns and inconsistencies related to the curricular transition, and information was a major commodity. However, by the time Kyle's brother, Sage, entered middle school, the district's transition to the new curriculum had been well under way.

Meet Sage

Sage is a 5′2″ tall 12-year-old middle school student who, unlike his brother, tends to enjoy school. Sage is quiet and reserved and he has a small circle of friends. When I visited his home, I found Sage playing videogames with his older brother. Of the two boys, Sage is a more avid gamer than Kyle, mostly because Kyle is on a number of school-based sports teams.

Sage did not have the same experience as Kyle in terms of placement. Sloane explained that much of this was due to her developed knowledge of the Common Core, placement protocols, and her rights as a stakeholder. In other words, she had survived the system: "I learned from my older son what my rights were. That I also would not crumble and die like they told me I would." Sloane also acknowledged that Sage's general academic trajectory was different; the teachers seemed more organized and less hesitant about the standards and exams. According to Sloane, Sage's biggest challenge was his quiet demeanor: "He is quiet…[so the teachers] do not see him because of that. I find that they pay the most attention to the most noise."

When I spoke with Sage about school, he indicated that much of his work was based on drill-and-skill methods: "Often we just look at the slide show and look at

the slides and copy things down." When I asked Sage what his teacher was doing while he was copying the information, he indicated that "she's in the front…she's controlling the slides." As Sage continued to tell me about his schooling, there were two resounding words—worksheets and copying. Even when Sage spoke of digital technology and collaborative situations, the objective was to find and copy information. Sage explained, "Well we used iPads and copied like notes down because we're about to read this book so I guess we're copying notes down about the book… just finding a website and copying it down from there."

Zombies in the Classroom

The boys' stories of school may be different, but they both suggest that policy-related hysteria can create a dystopian-like setting; the uncertainty and ambiguity related to integrating new curricular standards can wear away educators' humanity. Kyle's teachers were busy trying to negotiate standards and student success, and, based on Kyle and Sloane's testimony, the teachers' and administrators' compassion seemed to be masked by the stress of imminent and unsettling change. Given that, for Kyle's situation, the teachers were first reorganizing and responding to new state and federal mandates, there was a sense of chaos, confusion, and resentment. As noted earlier, according to Sloane, even Kyle's math teacher admitted to feeling uninformed and uncertain about the curricular changes, which resonated in her hostile proclamation that the children would not succeed. In a similar vein, according to Kyle and Sloane, there was an air of intolerance and unjust aggression in Kyle's history class.

Kyle's history class was an inclusion class, and, thus, there were three teachers present in the room: the teacher of record, the inclusion teacher, and an aide. According to Kyle, in his History class when he was talking with neighboring students (something he admitted to being inappropriate behavior), the teacher would penalize him and not others:

> I can be talking, and [the teachers will] send me out in the hall. Somebody else will be talking and nothing will happen. Like they [the teachers] were yelling at our class and … I got into class and they said, '[Kyle], go to the back.' I said, 'Why am I going to the back?' 'Because,' they said, 'you have to go to the back. We know that you're going to be talking.'

Kyle also reported that one of his friends criticized the teachers without penalty: "And then one of my other friends, they were yelling in our class saying, 'Everything takes a long time' and then he said, 'Well maybe if you guys didn't take so long to do everything then it wouldn't,' and nothing happened to him." Kyle felt as though there were an injustice, and his teachers' insensitivity made him feel as though he were a nuisance that could easily be disregarded with appropriate maneuvering.

Whereas Kyle's teachers seemed to have lost some of their humanity, Sage's teachers seemed to be timid and prudent, presenting required, but uninspired lessons. Even in English class, where discussion and interpretation typically have been

welcome, Sage explained that he "has a worksheet [to complete] most of the time," and other times his class will "look at a slide show or something like that." When I asked about history class, Sage said, "She gives us this worksheet…and we copy down notes." When I pressed further and asked Sage if he had been able to express an opinion in class, he noted that teachers "sometimes" asked his opinion, "like, do you think this person was a good person or something like that."

Looking to Videogames to Understand Change and Engagement

At the heart of the discussion of Kyle, Sage, and Sloane's journey is the concept of change and transformation. In the schools, state and federal mandates shifted curricular requirements, and, even though the Common Core had been announced as early as 2009, the teachers, students, and parents seemed unaware of the pending change until they were faced with its implementation. By looking to videogames as an exemplar of structured change, perhaps the educational community can consider various roads to adaptation that honor creativity, sensitivity, and educational soul.

In an Edutopia interview, game designer and educator, Katie Salen noted that, when students (and teachers) begin to think as game designers, there is a specific focus on purpose and audience:

> Who's their audience? Who are they designing for? And, for me, that's a very, very powerful idea in the 21st Century is that your first question is: who is on the other end of this thing that I am making? And I find that an incredible thing to see young kids, in particular, sort of considering. And, in terms of problem-solving, one thing games in particular we find do really, really well is that they throw a player into a kind of complex problem space that's scaffolded in really particular ways. There's a tension between challenge – like, how hard is this? – with the tools that are always there for you to use, that are going to allow you to figure the thing out (Big Thinkers 2009).

If Sage's teachers, who seemed to assign worksheets and privilege regurgitation over imagination, had considered the question, "Who is on the other side of this thing I am making?" perhaps the focus would have shifted from the product (e.g., the worksheet) to the process (e.g., how the students are acquiring the information). Especially with curricular change that requires teachers to align their practice with fulfilled standards, there is a risk that educators and administrators will perceive and/or regard such alignment as a "checkbox-style approach to learning rather than parameters for inspiring creativity and innovation" (Abrams 2015, p. 31).

In the spirit of supporting creative thinking in the face of change, the *Institute of Play* has created Gamekits (see http://beta.gamek.it) that help guide teachers and students to think about the transformation of play and meaning making when rules are modified. The purpose of one gamekit, Mod a Board Game, is to "get designers picking apart a game rebuilding it around new rules. Writing and modding rules can be tricky and it's often a good idea to start small and then expand." When it comes to curricular change and the introduction of new standards, perhaps the educational

community needs to start small and move slowly, something Diane Ravitch (2014) noted that she had suggested when asked about the Common Core. Further, similar to the gamekit exercise, educators and students (and parents) need to be involved in the curricular change, not just be subjected to it. This means beginning with a shift in one rule or standard and evaluating what changes as a result. Through such an iterative process, educators, students, and parents can become actively involved in one aspect of the process; it would be naïve to think that national standards—and the big business associated with new assessments and standards—would be fueled solely by grassroots movements or a bottom-up approach. However, if educators and administrators look to curricular resources as *a* model—not *the* model—then there can be room for interpretation and reform.

Rigid responses to imposed mandates can perpetuate an educational dystopia. If new curricula and assessments create predictable, seemingly soulless obstacles, then we can expect to see a system increasingly plagued by contrived work and mechanistic behavior. However, if educators and other stakeholders (e.g., students, parents) are resourceful, looking to each other for assistance and working as a community to find a solution, then perhaps the focus will continuously shift to authentic achievement and meaningful learning.

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