

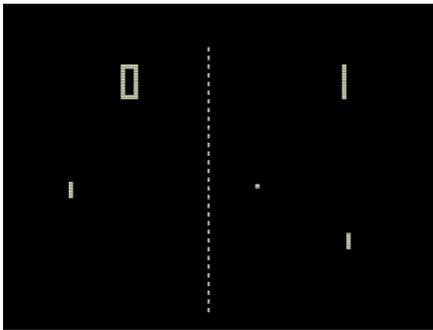
Curriculum Plan for Action Speaks: The Birth of Pong and Video Games

What is Action Speaks?

Action Speaks is a 16-year-old live panel discussion and radio show heard in over 300 markets. Action Speaks looks at contemporary issues through the lens of history by focusing on under-appreciated dates of the twentieth century and their subsequent effects that have served to change life, politics, and values in America.

Introduction to topic:

This episode focuses on the invention of one of the first widely-distributed and vastly popular video games, Pong, developed for the Atari system in 1972. Under the season title of “How can it hurt if it’s so much fun?” Action Speaks sought to explore the positive and negative social, developmental, psychological and other effects of video games in today’s world, all brought on by the advent of this first game and home system.



The game itself, first installed in arcades and later developed for home use, simulated a game of Ping-Pong with two controllable “paddles” (vertical lines) at each side of the screen, and a small “ball” that was volleyed back and forth between the paddles.

Although it wasn’t the first video game by a long shot (a demo of “Tennis for Two” was developed as early as 1958),

Pong marked the beginning of the popularization of home-use computer and game systems, and jump-started the industry of more technologically advanced imaginative games and the creation of virtual worlds and adventure games.

Despite the ubiquitous stereotype that “gamers” are angry teenage boys holed up in their basements, statistics from the Entertainment Software Association reveal that today’s average gamer is 37 years old and 29% of gamers are over 50 (these figures include “casual” games like Farmville, Solitaire, and Angry Birds, to name a few). Furthermore, in the 1980s, Atari’s market share was evenly split 50/50 between males and females, statistics that modern systems like the Wii also share. These facts force society to reconsider the breadth and depth of video game influence on a wider range of demographic groups, and subsequently to observe and discuss the effects of that influence.

Central Themes of Discussion:

Nature of play and games
Socialization
Youth Culture
Self-expression
Violence

Technology
Stigma/Stereotypes – race, gender, age
Fantasy
Military Application of Video Games
Skill development/Goal-oriented Activity

The panelists heard in the discussion are:

- **D. Fox Harrell, Ph.D** is Associate Professor of Digital Media at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has written extensively on identity and digital culture and has published an article called “Algebra of Identity: Skin of Wind, Skin of Streams, Skin of Shadows, Skin of Vapor” for *Theory Magazine*.
- **Mary Flanagan** is Professor of Film & Media Studies at Dartmouth College. She is the inaugural chair holder of the Sherman Fairchild Distinguished Professorship in Digital Humanities. She is the author of *Critical Play: Radical Game Design* and is the inventor of the first web-based digital game for girls “The Adventures of Josie True.”
- **Randall Nichols** is an Assistant Professor at Bentley University where his areas of interest are: the Political Economy of Media, New Technology, Media Industries, Video Games, Media Economics, and Popular Culture. His essay, “Target Acquired: America's Army and the Video Game Industry” is in *Joystick Soldiers: The Politics of Play in Military Video Games* edited by Nina B. Huntemann and Mathew Thomas Payne.
- **Michael Townsend** is a world record holder in video games and has been focused on conquering them since first introduced to Pong. He has actively gamed through the evolution of all major platforms from the Atari 2600 to the PS3. Townsend supports his gaming habit by drawing with tape as an internationally renowned public artist.

Links to additional information about each panelist can be found on the **Action Speaks website**: <http://www.actionspeaksradio.org/>.

Some additional books for information about this topic are:

- *Replay: The History of Video Games*, by Tristan Donovan. Yellow Ant: 2010.
- *Joystick Soldiers*. Edited by Nina B. Huntemann and Matthew Thomas Payne. Routledge: 2010
- *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*. By Jane McGonigal. Penguin: 2011
- *Critical Play: Radical Game Design*. By Mary Flanagan. MIT Press: 2009.

Here is the web address for an **online Mp3** of the entire panel discussion (about 1 hour in length): <http://as220.org/actionspeaks/audio/ActionSpeaksPong-20111019.mp3>.

New Vocabulary (used in selected clips):

platform	stigma
delegitimize	persona
mancala	anti-social
marginalize	critique
simulation	ostensibly
instrumental	encode
emerge	correlation
cartridge	determinism
seedy	desensitization
inhabit	strategy
transgress	

Pre-selected Clips by topic:

4:33-7:01, Introduction: Why should we care about video games, do they change society?

14:30-17:04, 18:00-20:39, Evolution of the video game industry: Arcade culture, boy/girl dynamic, youth culture and teenage hang-outs. Redefinition of who a “gamer” is.

21:40-24:02, 26:00-26:29, Gender/Race Stereotypes in Video Games: Perpetuation of stereotypes in game design, marketing of specific games to girls (i.e. Barbie Fashion Designer in 1996)

30:10-31:55, 34:25-35:26, Video Games as cause of Violence/Obesity: Myth of Technological Determinism

40:07-41:57, Skill development through gaming

42:00-43:10, Army usage of video games: Desensitization, strategy development, commercial for joining the army.

Integration into the classroom:

The topic of video games offers great potential for lively discussions amongst high-school age students, since most of them probably have played games at some point, and many likely play regularly, either on smart phones or game systems like the Xbox, Playstation 3, or others.

Depending on how deeply you want to delve into this topic, or a subset of the video game topic (i.e. violence in games, gender/racial stereotypes) incorporating Action Speaks could serve as a jumping-off point to a larger lesson plan, or as a digression or diversion from the standard classroom structure. The following is a suggested outline for a one-hour class period, followed by some additional supplementary materials to offer the possibility to expand some topics.

- I. Introduction (10-15 minutes):
 - a. Students brainstorm about their experience with video games. This can be a relatively short and free-form activity, aimed at getting their minds stimulated and focused on the topic. They can write words they associate with video games on a piece of paper, or you can take responses and write them on a board. They can list their favorite games, what they love or hate about games, with whom they play, how often they play, etc.
 - b. If the discussion should focus on only one aspect of video games (i.e. Do video games cause violence?), the brainstorm can start with a wide focus and be narrowed throughout the activity.
- II. Action Speaks Audio Clips (20-30 minutes)
 - a. Briefly introduce Action Speaks to tell the students the source of the material.

- b. Playing the first introductory clip can serve to introduce the panelists and the format of listening to audio.
- c. After the introduction, focus on one or two of the topics above (or one or more of your own choosing). Before playing the clip, encourage the students to think of their own questions or observations about the specific topic. Ideally, topics like teen culture's connection to video games or whether video games cause violence or obesity should inspire some strong opinions.
- d. Before playing the clip(s), encourage the students to take some notes while they listen – whether they agree or disagree with the panelists, what they found surprising or interesting, whether their questions or opinions were answered, etc.
- e. Play the topical clip(s).

III. Discussion and Wrap Up (10 minutes)

- a. Discussion after listening can start in small groups of 3 or 4 students so that everyone gets a chance to voice their opinions. In the small groups, they should discuss what they heard and the notes that they might have taken. You can also offer some discussion questions on the board or on a handout if they have difficulties getting a conversation going.
- b. Wrap up the discussion with the entire class, hearing reports from each of the small groups.
- c. A homework assignment might be to write up an opinion piece about their feelings about video games. See below for some example articles that could serve as inspiration for writing or for further discussion beyond one class period.

Additional Materials

“Does game violence make teens aggressive?” Kristin Kalning. MSNBC.com. 8 December 2006
http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/16099971/ns/technology_and_science-games/t/does-game-violence-make-teens-aggressive/#.T0uZ_vHZDd4

Mothers Against Video Game Addiction and Violence. <http://www.mavav.org/>

Video Game Tackles Childhood Obesity. Jinny Gudmundsen. ABC News. 8 October 2007.
<http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=3695822&page=1#.T0ubBfHZDd4>

Media Awareness Network. “Gender Stereotyping.”
http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/parents/video_games/concerns/gender_videogames.cfm

“Gender and Race on the Screen.” Education.com.
<http://www.education.com/reference/article/gender-race-screen/>

Additional Activity Suggestions

- Play one of the online free games suggested by the panelists (listed on the Action Speaks website) and have the students write a review of the game (what skills are needed, what kind of goal structure is there, are there any gender/racial stereotypes imbedded in the design, is it fun, etc.). If possible, this can be done in the classroom, or at home.
- Have a debate – split the class into two groups, for example one group for and one against violent video games, or for or against the existence/importance of stereotypes in game design. Implement a strict debate structure with two or three students serving as moderators who keep time and ultimately decide which side made a better argument. This activity would require a class period for preparation and research, as well as a period for the actual debate.
- Create a game – students can work together to develop a board game, or a proposal for a video game. Preliminary research/discussion can focus on describing attributes of a game and of play, why people like to play games, and what characteristics the best games share.