

Context Scenario - “Through My Eyes”

In his Language Arts class this marking period Kevin is reading a Harry Potter book. A lot of the kids in his class have already read it (as have a lot of kids he knows outside of class), but he hasn't. He hasn't even seen any of the movies. Frankly, he doesn't really get what all the fuss is about. Magic or no magic—they're *books*...about going to *school*! Not being a part of this community of readers leaves Kevin with some mixed feelings. On the one hand, he doesn't really care. He hasn't really been interested in storybooks for a while now; and he's got a plenty big community of his own he belongs to, one that he's an important member of—*World of Warcraft*. On the other hand, not being a part of the Harry Potter community feels like one more thing he's left out of, which always hurts at least a little.

Both Kevin's teachers and his parents have become more and more concerned about a somewhat dramatic, negative shift in his sociability in recent months, so they decide that he's a good candidate to participate in the school's new “Interactions Program,” which is built around Through My Eyes (TME). This simulation-gaming technology employs the interactive storytelling engine/AI behind *Versu* in a fully rendered 3D environment, where the player uses an Oculus Rift headset and Razer Hydra motion-sensing gaming controller to navigate the space. The goal of TME is to increase students' empathy and social skills through the medium of interactive fiction. Using this technology, Kevin can play through select, “unexplored” scenes from a book¹ in a highly immersive story environment from the first-person perspective of multiple characters. Character options for this title include Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Hermione Granger, Lucius Malfoy and Hagrid.

The school's Interactions Program for 6th-graders meets three times a week—on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—for two class periods a day. Kevin and one student from each of the school's two other 6th grade classes all play through the scene, though not together (i.e. not in the same—networked—game space). The first class period of each Interactions session is dedicated entirely to playing through the scene. Then, after a break between the two periods, all three of the students log off and have a group discussion with the Interactions teacher about what their play-through was like—what characters they

¹ What we're calling “unexplored” scenes are those that have only brief descriptions in the original text, but are rendered playable and interactive in this program—something like a VR-interactive version of the structure of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. For a brief example of how these unexplored scenes could be structured, see the Narrative Flowchart, below.

selected, what decisions they made and why, if they would have done things differently now that they think about it, etc. During this time, the teacher usually calls up gameplay footage to complement the discussion.

When participating in an Interactions session, each student is situated in his or her own “game spot”—a gaming station-area comprised of a monitor (which presents a 2D feed of what the player is seeing in-game) on top of a low table, on which there are a couple of shelves for storing students’ “rigs”—their Rifts and Hydras. Once the students are rigged up in their spots, the Interactions teacher will double-check each player’s set up, making sure everything is worn/held correctly and comfortably. Players then login to their user profile, where they can see “My Library” and “My TME Achievements” (which are non-title-specific achievements players can accumulate over time, such as total logged hours, total characters played, total decisions made, etc.). After selecting a story in My Library, players can choose which character they want to play as, and then to either “Continue Story” or “Start New Story.”

Kevin has used Through My Eyes a few times before this unit on Harry Potter, having played a few scenes from some short stories he read in his Language Arts class, but the experience (including his interactions with the technology) is still pretty new for him. Throughout the first couple of Interactions sessions Kevin was highly skeptical—and therefore critical—of the experience, saying that, even though the headset was maybe the coolest thing ever invented, there was way too much talking and not nearly enough action in the story he was playing. (“I’m okay with role-playing and all, but, c’mon! No battles at all?”) By the third session, however, Kevin had started to warm up to the experience, at first taking the majority of his enjoyment in “messing with the story” (taking actions he knew were counter to the plot of the printed text read in class), but eventually becoming more intrigued by the perspective-replay factor, by seeing how different characters would react to a given scenario.

On Monday, Kevin played as Harry. This choice—being the principal hero of a community he still feels rather on the outside of—brought back a bit of Kevin’s skepticism, but not long into the scene he was much more taken with the experience of what it was like to have such so many people staring in so many different ways at The Boy Who Lived—some with amazement, some with admiration, some with fear, some with jealousy, etc. According to Kevin, “It was way more intense than anything I’d felt whenever people tease me once in awhile for doing or saying something weird or whatever.” Kevin also found achieving the scene’s different story objectives—compellingly—difficult: “I had to keep asking Hagrid all sorts of stuff; because, I didn’t, y’know, know anything about this place!”

On Wednesday, Kevin played as Ron. He found this at once a more amusing experience (as this character provides more funny material) and a more frustrating one: “When you play as Ron, you have a lot less money to get stuff with. And you’ve got your mom randomly bothering you and fussing over you, which was pretty distracting.” Kevin also found that his social experience was notably different than his Harry playthrough: “It was kind of weird to go from lots of people looking at you onto the street to, like, hardly anybody paying attention to you. At one part I even thought to myself, ‘Did somebody cast an invisibility spell on me or something?’”

On Friday, Kevin was going to try playing as Hagrid; and he found himself wondering all sorts of things going into the day’s session. What would it be like to be that big, where you got to, or had to, look down on everyone? As Harry, Kevin tried to run away from Hagrid a number of times—so what would it be like to keep track of such a little person amidst all those other people? What would Hagrid’s dialogue options be like? Would there be fewer, because his character seemed to be a little “slow,” or would there be more, because he’s an adult who knows much more than the students? At the conclusion of this session, Kevin found himself even somewhat eager to compare experiences with the other two players during the Interaction’s discussion period.