2017

Teaching about (and with) Digital Games: Editor's Introduction

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Editor's Introduction

Allyson Shaffer, guest editor

Early digital games emerged in the mid-twentieth century, the unplanned child of the Cold War military-industrial complex and a burgeoning information technology industry. Programmers designed these early games to break up the monotony of their work and to experiment with the new technologies at their fingertips. Decades later, digital games have become an increasingly ubiquitous form of activity and entertainment. Interactive, electronic games now constitute a multi-billion dollar industry.

Though the stereotypical image of a "gamer" remains that of an antisocial white male in his teens or twenties, people across age brackets and identities play games on a variety of devices, from personal computers to dedicated consoles to mobile devices. Some are casual players, poking at a game to pass the time while taking public transit or waiting for a doctor's appointment. Others fervently dedicate hours each week to fighting pixel aliens, crushing candy, or hunting down rare and elusive Pokémon.

The ability of digital games to engross and immerse has not been uncontroversial. Popular discourse often imagines gaming as a kind of drug, addictive and destructive, making individuals unproductive, anti-social, even violent. While electronic crossword puzzles and simulations are generally considered innocuous, journalistic coverage has long pointed to action games, particularly shooters such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, as a primary cause of mass shootings and other violent crimes.

Other analyses, both academic and popular, situate the significance of digital games within a wider social, economic, and political context. Such discussions frequently question the exclusion and erasure of women and people of color within video game development. These discussions also examine the politics of representation at work in games: the ways in which, for example, many video games portray people of color as villains or monsters, women as victims of graphic violence, and hyper-masculine, straight, white males as heroes and protagonists. Some of the most outspoken critics - and defenders - of the ways in which games can perpetuate social injustices have been gamers themselves. In 2014, backlash against popular critical examination of digital games exploded in a "controversy" known as GamerGate, in which defenders of the more racist and misogynistic elements of games took it upon themselves to systemically threaten and harass those they disparaged as "social justice warriors."

Meanwhile, the format and function of digital games have been embraced by sectors beyond arts and entertainment. Interactive games are particularly prized for their ability to harness attention and motivation. In the hands of marketers, educators, healthcare professionals, and even philanthropists, games become tools for advertising, teaching, disseminating information, and shaping behaviors. Games-based learning, for example, has garnered a great deal of attention and debate among educators in recent years. This pedagogical practice aims to enhance student engagement by making the classroom more "game-like" in order to encourage risk-taking, experimentation, collaboration and/or competition. Assignments become quests, students

become adventurers, and grades are replaced with "badges." In higher education and beyond, "gamification"—that is, the adoption of games and game-design principles in real world contexts—has put games to work.

This issue of *Teaching Media Quarterly* presents lesson plans that explore a myriad of questions concerning the the role of interactive games in society and in the classroom. What ideological lessons do digital games teach? By what processes do digital games instruct players in developing certain capacities or taking on specific identities? How might digital games serve as a platform for marginalized voices? How might we approach the study of digital games in the classroom? And how can educators harness interactive games as a pedagogical technology?

"Game Lessons: Using *Zork* to Show Students What Computers Teach" by **Scott Kushner** can be easily integrated into an introductory survey course in media studies as an introductory lesson to gaming culture. This two day lesson incorporates a key reading, discussion questions, and in-class gameplay with *Zork*, which is a 1980s game that uses a line-command interface. Using younger student's unfamiliarity with the game to its advantage, Kushner's lesson plan helps students understand how games and other technologies can serve as historically and culturally specific pedagogical tools.

Jason Custer's "Understanding Procedural Rhetoric" fills a conceptual gap presented in Ian Bogost's "The Rhetoric of Videogames" by asking students to play and discuss video games together in the classroom, rather than relying on Bogost's argument as a stand-alone piece. Games such as *Super Tofu Boy* and *Meat Boy* challenge students to both identify and criticize procedural rhetoric. Instructors are provided with a clear lesson plan and lecture guide, including ideas on how to solicit critical thinking from students through a collaborative Google Doc.

Benjamin Thevenin's lesson, "Twine as Alternative Media: Video Games, the Culture Industry and Social Change," explores the potential of games—or, more particularly, the potential of game making—for addressing social issues of importance to students. To prepare to create their "Game for Change," students complete readings on concepts like dialect, culture industries, and alternative media. Over approximately four class meetings, students engage in class activities to explore these concepts, bringing them to bear on various media examples (*Inception* (2010), *The Lego Movie* (2014), among others). Students then research a social issue of their choosing and analyze the way in which that issue is represented in mainstream media. Finally, students use the open-source, game-making tool, Twine, to create a "Game for Change" that resists the dominant narratives associated with their chosen social issue. The final game is accompanied by a written artist's statement.

Cathlena Martin and **Benton Tyler**'s "Character Creation: Gamification and Identity" provides students the tools to explore personal identity while critically assessing stereotypes in video games. The creation of individual student avatars prompts conversations regarding the traits of their own characters, as well as broader discussions surrounding playability in video games, what sorts of bodies and character traits are most often seen with video games, as well as traits invisible within the gaming sphere and beyond. This lesson plan bridges the gap between discourse and materiality and provides students with a concrete way to view identity and its limitless nuances. Drawing from texts by renowned gaming scholars and offering interactive

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ways to "gamify" the classroom, this lesson plan can be easily expanded to fit semester long gaming centric courses, or adapted to fit media studies courses more generally for a gaming unit or module.

Biography

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Allyson Shaffer studies digital media, labor, temporality, and affect. She has written about how the video game industry has participated in changes in work and the economy over the past several decades. She has an MA in Communication Studies from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

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