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Understanding Procedural Rhetoric

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Overview

In the past decade game studies emerged as a burgeoning branch of scholarship. Two of the most prominent voices in game studies include Ian Bogost and James Paul Gee, both of whom extol the values of computer games for students as tools for learning and creating. One of the most enduring elements of Ian Bogost's scholarship focused on computer games is his notion of procedural rhetoric, which he defines as "the practice of effective persuasion and expression using processes" (2008). In short, he sees games as uniquely suited to do this sort of work, since "when video games represent things—anything from space demons to long-term debt—they do so through procedurality, by constructing rule-based models of their chosen topics." According to Bogost, then, computer games allow designers to establish sets of rules that give way to constructing particular worldviews that gameplay mechanics and systems reinforce.

This lesson plan presents a solution to one of the greatest problems that comes with studying Bogost's proposed concept of procedural rhetoric: how do you study it without actually experiencing the systems he discusses? Or, in other words, how do you evaluate the procedural rhetoric of a game unless you actually play the game itself? Even then, how do you help students to understand the difference between a game that mounts a strong procedural rhetoric as opposed to a weak one? Instructors interested in teaching with games or exposing students to a unique form of rhetorical analysis will find a large selection of games for students to play in class—using nothing more than a simple computer and a web browser—and in turn, provide them with foundational knowledge of what procedural rhetoric is, how to identify it, and how to criticize it.

Rationale

In the past 30 years, computers and composition studies emerged and established the ubiquity and importance of multimodal composing practices (Brooke; Hawisher and Selfe; Kress; Palmeri; Selfe; Shipka). A major part of this ideological movement has been considering the new possibilities presented by creating and analyzing texts in a wide range of media. The playing and development of computer games becomes increasingly simplified with programs like AXMA and Twine allowing anyone to make simple text-based adventure games that play in almost any web browser, while major 3D game engines like Blender, Unity, and Unreal now allow anyone to download and use them free of charge. As such, studying computer games through the lens of Bogost's procedural rhetoric presents students with an opportunity to be critical of a medium many of them may have never given much critical thought to and one that has never been more accessible. Building on that, it serves as a worthy reminder of how the new platforms and media rapidly disseminating in digital contexts provide new semiotic and analytical possibilities.

While I designed this lesson to fit into a larger unit in a First Year Composition course, I wanted to insure this particular lesson could be integrated into a wide range of courses and contexts. My students were working on a research project focused analyzed the procedural rhetoric in a game of their choosing, however this exploration of procedural rhetoric can function as a standalone exploration in a range of rhetoric and media studies courses as well. In my course I asked students to pick a game to discuss, identify what systems and processes are contained within it, play the game while considering what the game's mechanics encouraged them to do (or not do), and then do library research to see how the game's systems and mechanics represented the real world system in question, and what the implications might be. One student, for instance, wrote about a horror game titled *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*. In this game, players must balance a "sanity meter" which can decrease as they see and get seen by various enemies in the game's world. In short, if you see something terrifying, your "sanity" drops which the player sees take place in the form of a small bar decreasing in the game's interface. The student in question did scholarly research into what medical journals said about how "sanity" functions, and considered what the implications were for how *Amnesia* simplified them.

As seen in a series of games made by independent developers and activist groups like PETA, gamer designers regularly use games in influence how their players see the world around them. It can be difficult to understand how a concept like procedural rhetoric functions, but reading about, playing, and then evaluating a series of games can help students grasp how games make an argument about real world processes. Beyond understanding the concepts themselves, it may prove trickier still to help students see beyond the content of a game to evaluate whether the mechanics clash with the message. One interesting example of a game with a weak procedural rhetoric that Bogost discusses in *Persuasive Games* is *Congo Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Bark* (2007)¹. In discussing *Congo Jones* he argues that that while the game's message is in opposition of deforestation, it does so by using the mechanics of a platforming game like *Super Mario Brothers* (e.g. jumping and avoiding obstacles). Does a game employing mechanics like jumping make an argument about deforestation? Bogost argues that it does not do so especially well. This makes playing and examining titles like *Meat Boy* and *Super Tofu Boy* together a helpful way of engaging with and understanding procedural rhetoric.²

Taking a closer look at *Meat Boy* and *Super Tofu Boy* helps demonstrate just how challenging identifying and analyzing procedural rhetoric can be. Since a game like *Super Tofu Boy*, similar to *Congo Jones*, was designed to make an argument in particular (*Super Tofu Boy* was created by PETA and is about supporting a vegetarian lifestyle), it stands as a prime example of a game with a weak procedural rhetoric. *Meat Boy* itself is a platformer which, per the designer's own insight, is not actually about eating or producing meat at all.³ Since both are games in the

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1. *Congo Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Bark* is also linked to in Appendix A.
 2. These titles can be found in Appendix A as well, and how to apply them in class is discussed with more depth in Step 2 of Day 2.
 3. *Indie Game: The Movie*, directed by James Swirsky and Lisanne Pajot (2012; Blinkworks Media), DVD.

platforming genre, *Super Tofu Boy* attempts to criticize *Meat Boy* using precisely the same mechanics as its source — jumping, avoiding obstacles, and attempting to complete levels. Based on Bogost’s definition of procedural rhetoric, a game with jumping as a core mechanic does not necessarily say much of value about eating meat or supporting a vegetarian lifestyle, and by simply borrowing the mechanics of *Meat Boy* it can easily be argued that *Super Tofu Boy* does not make a successful procedural argument. In fact, neither necessarily have a procedural rhetoric of any kind, even if their visuals or artistic themes may attempt to affect the player.

The increasing use of games with political purposes, and the fact that games require active audience interaction to make arguments highlights the importance of encouraging students to think about how the unique affordances of specific media can make or reinforce ideas and arguments. This lesson plan, then, serves as the point of departure for all students embarking on what will almost certainly be their first foray into analyzing the rhetorical implications for a computer game’s mechanics. Even after reading Bogost’s article “The Rhetoric of Videogames,” which includes a fundamental introduction to procedural rhetoric prior to class, however, many students may understandably remain fairly confused and disoriented. Bogost argues what my experiences bore out over time: “interacting with procedural systems that make strong ties between the processes in a model and a representational goal—those with strongly argued procedural rhetorics. Otherwise said, we can become procedurally literate through play itself” (Persuasive 255). With this line of reasoning, Bogost suggests that we must actively play games to build our procedural literacy, and by doing so, become more effective critics of procedural rhetoric in games, as well as other contexts.

General Timeline

For this particular lesson, this exercise usually requires two 75-minute class periods. Before the first class students should read Ian Bogost’s article “The Rhetoric of Videogames.” The first half of the first day opens with a class discussion and going through an explanatory presentation that breaks down some of the more complex elements of procedural rhetoric. After establishing baseline knowledge of the concept, students will play a series of games in class for the second half of the first day, and the first half of the second day. Using the sizeable list of games at their disposal— some designed to make a specific point with their mechanics, and others where a procedural rhetoric is much harder to extrapolate (if at all possible)— encourage students play games that interest them before playing a select few at the same time as a larger group. Students should also be encouraged to play and critique as many games as they can and consider their successes and failures as texts bearing a procedural rhetoric. To facilitate this, provide students with a collaborative resource they can all edit, such as a Google Document, with spaces for each game and a series of questions about the game they played. For the second half of the second day, take time to discuss some specific examples of games from the list and whether or not they present a relatively strong or weak procedural argument based on what they experience of them.

The discussion of Animal Crossing in Bogost's text outlines what procedural rhetoric is, but will likely only make sense for students with experience playing this one series. Students with experience playing Animal Crossing will likely have an immediately better frame of understanding of procedural rhetoric and procedurality. The in-class gameplay that follows this introductory presentation should help students unfamiliar with computer games or Animal Crossing better understand the concept by playing games themselves.

Lesson Plan

Day 1

On this first day, your goal will be to discuss Bogost's article, introduce and explain procedural rhetoric, and get students to start playing games in class to start developing procedural literacy.

Before Class

Ask students to read Ian Bogost's article "The Rhetoric of Videogames" as homework prior to the first meeting focused on procedural rhetoric.

Lecture to Introduce Procedural Rhetoric

Using Appendix C, run through the basics of procedural rhetoric with your students. The major points of discussion you should cover are listed in the steps outlined in Steps 1-4 in the Bogost Introduction section.

Bogost Introduction

Step 1: Explaining Procedurality

- Start your discussion by asking students their thoughts and what they understood from Bogost's piece— this helps establish what they did or did not absorb from his complex academic text.
- After establishing how well students comprehended the content, begin with basic information about Ian Bogost (e.g. his academic position and a bit about him as a game designer), followed by an explanation of Bogost's discussion of procedurality.
- A good place to begin discussing procedural rhetoric with students is by discussing one of Bogost's biggest examples from his article— the game *Animal Crossing*.
- When explaining procedurality to students, emphasize Bogost's points about how games are built on a series of processes, and how the model things from the real world. In the case of *Animal Crossing*, it is using processes to demonstrate how small town life functions, and as Bogost asserts, capitalism.

- Once students understand that games are built on and use processes to engage their players, they should be ready to receive a more in-depth explanation of how procedural rhetoric functions in games.

Step 2: Explaining Rhetoric

- In Bogost's text he provides a basic overview of rhetoric; use this as a transition from procedurality to rhetoric, which then moves into procedural rhetoric.
- Make sure students have a basic understanding of rhetoric before moving on. This can prove especially challenging, however, with students that are less experienced or knowledgeable with rhetorical studies or playing games. In particular, students who may have never played a computer game at all may be confused about applying complex theory to a kind of text they have no experience with.
- Bogost himself provides his own simple definition of procedural rhetoric on page 125 of "The Rhetoric of Videogames" which serves this activity's purposes nicely: "procedural rhetoric for the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively" (Bogost, 2008).

Step 3: Explaining Procedural Rhetoric

- From here, students should have even just a fundamental knowledge of the terms rhetoric and procedurality, and the last quote tends to help students process the connections between procedurality and rhetoric.
- At this point, run students through Bogost's major arguments about what procedural rhetoric is in the article, and also complement it with some quotes from his book *Persuasive Games* (Bogost, 2007).
- These quotes and explanations usually blend into other parts of what we discuss up to that point, but before moving on, make sure students understand a surface-level definition of procedural rhetoric— that games use processes, and processes can be used to make a point.

Step 4: Explaining Applications of Procedural Rhetoric from Bogost's Text

- Another thing Bogost's article does exceptionally well is walk through procedural rhetoric in action with select examples from different games— both mainstream and incredibly niche.
- One of his first examples is the game *America's Army*, a game produced by the Armed Forces which simulates and adheres to the Army's true to life Rules of Engagement.
- Talking through examples like this one and some of his others from the text— *The McDonald's Game*, *Bully*, and *Spore* in particular— all allow students to discuss and explore the basics of procedural rhetoric, and what it can look like in action.

Developing Procedural Literacy: Playing Games

The problem all of this presents, of course, hinges on Bogost's own argument in the text— how can we fully understand the procedural rhetoric of a game, or how it functions, without actually playing the game? That is what happens in the core of what makes this activity unique.

Playing Games in Class (!)

Appendix A includes a list of games and hyperlinks for students to play, consider, and begin gaining procedural literacy through playing, but first, students need to get set up to play the games. All of the games listed in the appendix only require a browser with an updated version of Adobe Flash installed in order to work.⁴ None of them should require students to install anything to their personal computers or school computers in order to work.⁵

Step 1: During Gameplay

- For the actual games themselves, several of the games on the list work explicitly because they make an argument through their processes and mechanics, such as *Phone Story*, *Every Day the Same Dream*, and *Pandemic 2*. These games get mixed with others like *Meat Boy*, *Congo Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Bark*, *Super Tofu Boy*, and *Cookie Clicker* which encourages students to not just see how every game presents a procedural rhetoric (if they know all of them do, they may assume any and every game has a strong procedural rhetoric) but also how to evaluate their success or failure.
- Once students start playing games, allow them to sample as many as possible within the remaining time.⁶ This allows them to play as much as possible, and by extension, build procedural literacy under your guidance.

Step 2: Commenting on Games

Using a collaborative document like a Google Doc (with subsections for all of the games included on it) make an ad-hoc analysis and discussion of the games between students as they

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4. Using Google Chrome as a browser for this exercise should help this process work as smoothly as possible, since the vast majority of versions of Chrome have Flash built in by default, making set-up as easy as clicking on the hyperlinks in Appendix A from a browser.
 5. This does, however, mean that these games will not work easily (if at all) on many tablets running an operating system like iOS or Android. Keep this in mind if your class cannot access computers with Chrome installed or another Flash-enabled browser.
 6. It is highly unlikely any student will completely play all of the games in Appendix A in both days available for this activity, so expect students to not finish playing games on the first day of class. When time runs out on the first day of class, ask students to find a good stopping point, and then inform them that they will continue playing games in the next class period.

play. Ask them to play the games and then add in sections in the collaborative document so it can serve as something of a real-time wiki, as you can see in the sample provided in Appendix D. Students will respond to the following prompts seen in Appendix B for each game they play:

Game Name

- What does this game represent?
- What mechanics does the game use to support that representation?
- What are some potential arguments made by the mechanics?
- In what ways do the mechanics match the argument?
- In what ways do the mechanics clash with/ignore the argument?
- How might you research these representations in the “real world”?

Day 2

On this second day, students will start by continuing to play games to further develop procedural literacy on games that interest them, followed by a focused conversation on a few titles to synthesize their understanding of procedural rhetoric.

Developing and Discussing Procedural Rhetoric

Step 1: Resume Playing Games

Ask students to continue playing games in class and adding their notes on the various games on the list as their interest guides them. This will refresh their memory about the task at hand and let them continue to develop procedural literacy. Allow students to continue playing games until about 20-30 minutes of class remain to allow you to have a large-scale discussion about specific titles and pull everyone’s attention to specific examples to see what conclusions they drew while they played.

Step 2: Highlighting Games for Class Discussion

In day one and the first half of day two, students should have been playing the games that interested them and considering the extent to which they present a successful procedural rhetoric. In the final half of the second day, point students to a specific subset of games that all students will play simultaneously.⁷ While any number and combination of games may suit your purposes better, one of the best conversation-starters for procedural rhetoric is the coupling of *Meat Boy* and *Super Tofu Boy* since, as seen in the Rationale above, it builds on a point Bogost himself

7. Part of Appendix A includes multiple games that cover the same topic in different ways, including games about deforestation, the game *Meat Boy* and a PETA parody *Super Tofu Boy*, and finally two games from Molleindustria titled *Faith Fighter* and *Faith Fighter 2*. These games serve as great points of departure for discussing procedural rhetoric.

makes in his scholarship. Whichever combination of games you select for students to play simultaneously, ask them to keep the questions from Appendix B in mind as they play.

Step 3: Discussing Game Play

- After everyone plays *Meat Boy* followed by *Super Tofu Boy* at the same time, bring the class together to discuss as a group whether it mounts a strong, weak, or essentially nonexistent procedural rhetoric by working through the questions in Appendix B one by one.
- After discussing *Meat Boy* and *Super Tofu Boy* it can be helpful to move on to another PETA title like *Cooking Mama: Mama Kills Animals*. After seeing a previous PETA game with a poor procedural rhetoric, they will likely be critical of this game right away and suspect it also lacks a strong procedural rhetoric.
- Unlike *Super Tofu Boy*, the mechanics of *Cooking Mama: Mama Kills Animals* task players with dismembering animals from start to finish, putting a very disturbing look at how food gets prepared at the forefront. After asking all students to play this game, return to the questions from Appendix B for discussion.
- In this case, an argument for *Cooking Mama: Mama Kills Animals* as a successful critique of the long-running *Cooking Mama* series becomes much easier to make. While it does borrow from the mechanics of the core *Cooking Mama* games such as cooking meals and preparing meat for human consumption, *Mama Kills Animals* emphasizes the process of butchering animals in somewhat graphic detail throughout its gameplay—something traditional *Cooking Mama* games leave out of the equation.
- By drawing attention to the hidden elements of food preparation and making the player participate in the bloody deconstruction of a turkey *Mama Kills Animals* mounts a far more successful procedural rhetoric than *Super Tofu Boy* does; rather than jumping to make an argument about food preparation, players must use the game's mechanics to dismember a turkey and place it on the Thanksgiving table. Through its mechanics, it makes an argument about how raising and butchering a turkey for Thanksgiving works, which players can then accept or reject.
- After these discussions about select examples, continue looking through the games based on your personal interest or perhaps other games that interest your students with the questions above guiding conversation. I recommend giving everyone roughly five minutes to play each game— either for the first time or again— with those questions in mind, and then go through them beat-by-beat to see how well they grasp the concept of procedural rhetoric.

In Closing

Before completing these tasks across two class periods, students should come away with a firm understanding of what procedural rhetoric is, how it functions, and with a modicum of procedural literacy as well. I recommend looking at several games as a group if students truly

struggle to understand the process on their own, however, asking them to play and analyze titles on their own as a necessary step toward developing procedural literacy instead of encouraging them to lean on your own perspective or analysis of these titles.

Teaching materials

Readings

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Biography

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Jason Custer is a doctoral candidate in Rhetoric and Composition at Florida State University. His scholarship focuses on games and learning, multimodal composing, program assessment, and writing center studies

Appendix A: Procedural Game List

- <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ZX-LvfZVFLuQFoc8ByMeh2hBE663Uopb1SbhD0GJkdA/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix B: Questions for Students to Write About While Playing:

- <https://docs.google.com/document/d/18CU9S8V6uOH6TUjUZ1smKJKsWGGySDc8v9DqFqdethc/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix C: Bogost and Procedural Rhetoric Presentation

- <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1TGQ7ttrvGTT4DuN1ppuXc6qToh79lPr9lr1Irxdjbn8/edit?usp=sharing>

Appendix D: Sample Class Notes Taken By Students

- <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1d7ZYOmWx10svf04vPVfHCDgmBtbRT0EvHifj23uam7I/edit?usp=sharing>