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## Twine as Alternative Media: Video Games, the Culture Industry and Social Change

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## Twine as Alternative Media: Video Games, the Culture Industry and Social Change

### Overview

Videogames—and specifically interactive, text-based narratives like Twine—provide a potentially productive platform for individuals and communities to address social issues that affect them and challenge mainstream media’s dominant representations of these issues. The following lesson includes activities and discussions that will help students better understand the relationship between *media* and *society*. Students are introduced to terms like the *dialectic*, the *culture industry* and *alternative media*. They are guided through critical analyses of media texts including films and games as a means of recognizing the role of media in the dialectical process of social change. Lastly, they each create a Game for Change, in which they (1) select a social issue that interests/affects them, (2) research the social issue and evaluate how the issue has been represented in public discourse and mainstream media, and (3) use the platform Twine to create a text-based videogame that addresses their chosen social issue.

### Rationale

Kellner and Share (2007) state that critical media literacy “involves a multi-perspectival critical inquiry of media culture and the cultural industries that address issues of class, race, gender, sexuality and power and also promotes the production of alternative counter-hegemonic media” (8-9). The following lesson combines critical analyses of media and power with the production of alternative media; instructor-directed analyses of media texts and student-directed research of social issues culminate in the students’ creation of the Game for Change.

To facilitate students’ critical engagement with the relationship between media and society, a few terms are particularly productive. The *dialectic* employed by philosopher G.W.F. Hegel provides an effective framework for understanding the role of human activity—and media, specifically—in the process of social change (see Maybee 2016). The concept of the *culture industry*, introduced by social theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1947/2002), characterizes media’s role in this process as disruptive, distracting, and pacifying the public and thus preventing social progress. And lastly, *alternative media* function to challenge the dominant discourse within media culture, exposing contradictions within society, allowing marginalized communities to speak for themselves and advocating for positive social change.

While videogames are often perceived as entertainment, the lessons offered here explore their emancipatory potential. By inviting *interaction*, encouraging *identification* with characters, and *immersing* players in new environments, games may position the public in a unique way, exposing it to new situations and encouraging it to consider new perspectives. Bogost (2007) discusses games’ employment of *procedural rhetoric* as a particularly effective pedagogical process—players learn about the operations of power within a particular context as they make choices and experience consequences (ix). Bogost (2011) highlights games’ use of *operationalized weakness*—when certain choices are deliberately denied the player—as a means of highlighting certain inequities of power (21).

The rise in popularity of indie games, and the increased accessibility of game design software like Twine, have established videogames as a site where communities who have been traditionally marginalized within media culture can find a voice and share their experiences (see Hudson 2014). Women, LGBTQ persons, survivors of abuse and/or mental illness have used these new platforms to confront the issues facing their communities (see Dyer-Witthford and de Peuter 2009; Anthropy 2012; Shaw 2014). And continuing in the tradition of activist game developers like Games for Change (see [www.gamesforchange.org](http://www.gamesforchange.org)) these game designers have made a positive impact not simply on their communities, but also on the game industry and larger media culture. The Game for Change assignment in the following lessons encourages students to explore videogames as a site to create counter-hegemonic media as a means of raising awareness and enacting change in the issues that matter to them.

## Key Terms

*videogames, culture industry, alternative media, social change, dialectic, social justice, critical media literacy, Twine*

## Timeline

The lessons are ideally taught in four, one- to two-hour sessions, allowing students time between sessions to complete the required readings, screenings, and playings.

## Final Assignment Description: Game for Change

Introduce the students to the Game for Change assignment. Reference that the name of the assignment comes from a tradition of social activist-oriented game design (see [www.gamesforchange.org](http://www.gamesforchange.org)). Describe the assignment to the students:

Each student will create a videogame using Twine (see [twinery.org](http://twinery.org)) that raises awareness about a particular social issue that they feel has been inadequately addressed in public discourse and mainstream media. Games will be accompanied by a 400-500 word “artist’s statement” which contextualizes the creative work within the concepts addressed in class. Artist statements must refer to *at least 3 research sources* that address this issue (including news stories, scholarly works, documentaries, etc.), and situate their game (the perspectives it represents and the experience it provides) in relation to these sources. Artist statements should also include a discussion of the aesthetic presentation of their ideas, the information provided, the ideological perspective(s) represented, and the way in which the game encourages engagement.

## Lesson 1: Media & Society

### *Objective*

By the end of the session, students should be familiar with the concept of the *dialectical process of social change* and recognize both the productive and counter-productive roles of media in this process.

### ***Preparation***

Prepare movie clips:

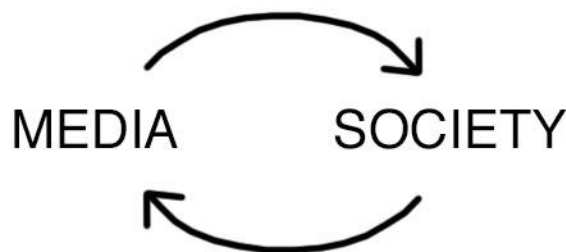
- *Inception* (2010) – The film follows Cobb, who leads a team of thieves in entering the dreams of their “mark” and planting an idea in his mind. In this particular scene, Cobb introduces to Ariadne the concept of dream-sharing. Ariadne realizes she is in a dream and the dreamworld collapses.
- *The Lego Movie* (2014) – A Lego construction worker named Emmet, prophesized to be the chosen one, joins the quest to prevent Lord Business from gluing the Lego universe and preventing any thought or creativity. In this particular scene, Emmet wakes up and readies himself for the day, relying on his instructions to guide him through his morning routine.

### ***Discussion: Media & Society***

Ask students to discuss how the relationship between *Media* and *Society* are commonly characterized. *According to popular discourse, what is the nature of the relationship of “media” and “society”?*

- Media affects society. Examples may include conversations surrounding the observed effects of social media use or videogames on youths’ ability to interact with others, engage in pro-social behaviors, etc.
- Media is a reflection of society. Examples may include conversations surrounding news media that reports on or entertainment media that responds to current events and/or issues.

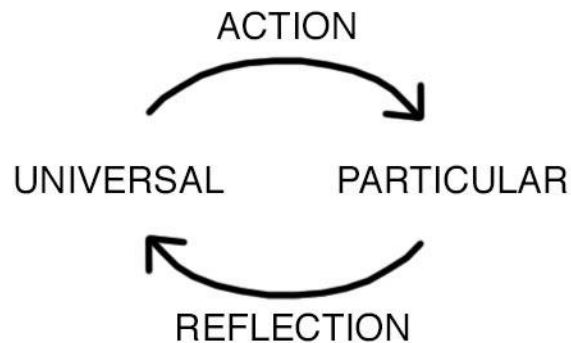
Explain that this unit will address the dynamic relationship between media and society.



### ***Demonstration: The Dialectic***

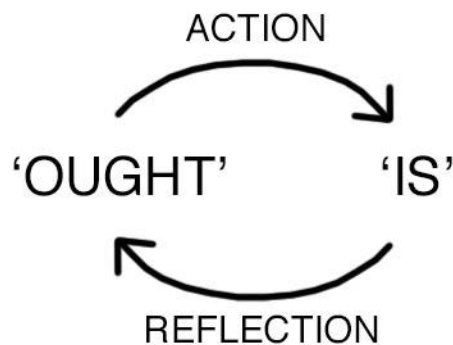
Introduce the concept of the dialectic. Reference the term’s origin in classical Greece and subsequent use in various philosophical traditions: The dialectic refers to a type of reciprocal relationship between two concepts, characterized by their productive tension (see Maybee 2016). Explain that Prussian philosopher Hegel used the dialectic as a model to understand the process of social change:

Hegel's analysis of human progress attributes positive social change to the dialectical relationship between *universal* ideas—like truth or freedom—and *particular*, practical efforts to realize these ideas—economic systems, political organizations, religious institutions, etc. Historically, individuals have identified the core values in their communities (*universal*) and then taken *action* to realize those values in their institutions, cultures, practices (*particular*). And then throughout history, communities have *reflected* on these particular efforts to realize their values in society, and determined what productive changes might be made to their values or subsequent realizations. It is when communities (1) recognize the contradictions between universal and particular, and (2) engage in a process of action and reflection, that they are able to create social change. (For a more in-depth explanation of Hegel's dialectics, see Maybee 2016.)



### ***Discussion: Media & Social Change***

Prompt the students to consider media's role(s) in the dialectical process of social change.



*In what ways have media helped you recognize the difference between what "Is" happening in the world and what "Ought" to be happening?*

- Students' experiences watching documentary films that address particular social issues.
- Students' experiences reading articles shared on social media that helped them develop new political or ideological perspectives.

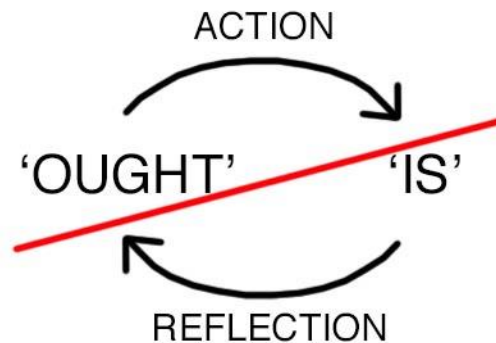
Explain that, especially as aspiring scholars and makers of media, we recognize the power of media to contribute to positive social change in the world. Suggest that mainstream media also often operate in a way that inhibits this dialectical process of social change.

**Activity: Inception Analysis**

Introduce the scene from *Inception* in which Cobb introduces to Ariadne the concept of dream-sharing. Ariadne realizes she is in a dream, and the dreamworld collapses. Invite the students to consider how *Inception*'s narrative—and this scene in particular—might be understood as a metaphor for the role media often plays in the dialectical process of social change. Watch the clip.

*How might we understand this clip as a metaphor for the role media often play in the dialectical process of social change?*

- Cobb is describing a process (Create & Perceive) similar to the process we've discussed (Act & Reflect). He even uses a similar diagram.
- Cobb introduces a way of interrupting this process, which may represent the role media can play in this process.



Explore the parallels between the film and the conversation about media's role in the process of social change: The film follows Cobb and his crew as they use the technology of “dream-sharing” to enter into the consciousness of their “mark” and construct a reality in which they are in control as a means of persuading him to believe and do something that they desire.

*How do media often work similarly to Cobb's “inception”?*

- Media CONSTRUCT realities that serve particular purposes.
- Media INHIBIT reflection and action, by distracting us from social concerns or pacifying us.
- Media PERSUADE us to think or act in certain ways.

### **Activity: The Lego Movie Analysis**

Introduce the sequence from *The Lego Movie* in which Emmet wakes up and readies himself for the day, relying on his instructions to guide him through his morning routine. Invite the students to consider how the film uses satire to point out some potentially problematic ways in which media and power operate in our society. Watch the clip.

*In what ways do media operate in this clip to CONSTRUCT, INHIBIT and PERSUADE?*

- The song “Everything is Awesome” has the public literally repeating the sentiment that everything that *IS* happening, *OUGHT* to be happening.
- The adherence to “following the instructions” prevents Emmet (and by implication, the whole community) from thinking and acting for themselves.

*What parallels can you identify between the film’s representations of the relationship between media and society and your own perceptions and experiences?*

- Entertainment media distract us from important social issues.
- Media culture popularizes certain styles, trends, products, etc., and encourages certain attitudes and behaviors.

## **Lesson 2: The Culture Industry**

### **Objective**

By the end of the session, students should be familiar with the concept of the *culture industry*, its characteristics and the potential role of *alternative media* to challenge the culture industry.

### **Preparation**

Prepare movie clip:

- *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) – A French actress and a Japanese architect have an affair while in Hiroshima following World War II. In this opening scene, the lovers Elle and Lui embrace and share their memories of the bombing of Hiroshima.

### **Watch**

“The Danger of a Single Story” by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Author Adichie cautions against relying on single representations of peoples and cultures in forming our understanding of others.

### **Activity: WWII Brainstorm**

Invite the students to name titles of media that represent World War II. List them on the board. Examples may include:

- *Band of Brothers* (2001) (miniseries)
- *Call of Duty* (2003 and 2016, for example) (videogame franchise)
- *The Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank (memoir)
- *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011)
- *Saving Private Ryan* (1998)
- *Night* (1956) by Elie Wiesel (memoir)
- *Maus* (1986) by Art Spiegelman (graphic novel)

Invite the students to identify the most popular (commercially & critically) titles. Circle these titles.

*What patterns do you see in the representations of WWII we have identified here?*

- The protagonists are often white, American soldiers.
- In some cases, the protagonists are European Jews.
- They feature representations of violence—on the battlefield or in concentration camps.
- They are set in the conflict in Europe.

### ***Discussion: The Danger of a Single Story***

Help the students make the connection between the dominant representations of WWII that they identified and Adichie’s TED Talk.

*According to Adichie what is the danger of a single story?*

- Single stories privilege certain perspectives repeatedly and fail to feature a variety of experiences.
- Single stories are unable to represent complex realities and often rely on stereotypes.

*What implications does this have on our discussion of media representations of WWII?*

- By repeatedly representing the experiences of white, American soldiers, other perspectives—those of women, civilians, people of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, etc.—are absent.
- By reducing WWII to a fight between “good” and “bad” guys, the complexities of the conflict are unrepresented and the “bad” guys are often dehumanized.

### ***Discussion: The Culture Industry***

Introduce the *culture industry*: During WWII, a group of Jewish Marxist intellectuals fled Germany and came to the United States. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno developed a concept called *the culture industry* (1947/2002). They asserted that contemporary popular culture served to inhibit the dialectical process of social change. Their arguments included:

1. **UNIFORMITY**: Culture is dominated by sameness. The WWII activity provides one example of sameness. Adichie’s talk further demonstrates this point.



*What other examples of uniformity in pop culture can you identify?*

- Endless remakes, reboots, sequels, prequels, covers and remixes
- Dominance of genre television and films
- Popular music that uses the same hook or structure

2. **STYLE & SPECTACLE > SUBSTANCE:** Culture is designed to distract from suffering within society.

*In what ways do media use style and spectacle to distract audiences?*

- The dominance of big-budget, action-oriented blockbuster movies in Hollywood
- The cooptation of new stylistic movements for commercial purposes

3. **UNITY WITH THE STATUS QUO:** Culture serves to maintain a status quo characterized by inequality. It is a delivery mechanism for the dominant ideology.

*How do media serve to reinforce the status quo?*

- Media encourage consumption, serving corporate interests (and ultimately the maintenance of capitalism).
- The dominance of narratives that end with the return to balance reinforces the notion that suffering is no longer an issue and “Everything IS Awesome.”

**Activity: Hiroshima Mon Amour Analysis**

Invite the students to consider whether there is an alternative to Adorno & Horkheimer’s culture industry thesis. Since Adorno & Horkheimer introduced the term, critical theorists and cultural scholars have debated whether the culture industry adequately characterizes media culture. For example, scholars, from the British cultural studies tradition, have explored the idea that audiences have greater agency than discussed by Adorno & Horkheimer and that through active interpretation and amateur production, the public can create and circulate new and potentially alternative meanings in media culture.

Introduce the concept of alternative media:

- They are produced independent of the industry.
- They utilize structures, characters and aesthetics that confront the conventional.
- They are counter-hegemonic—challenging dominant ideological perspectives and corporate control of media industries.
- They allow marginalized communities to share their perspectives and experiences.
- They shine a light on suffering as a means of promoting action and change.

Introduce the sequence in *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) in which lovers Elle and Lui embrace and share their memories of Hiroshima. Invite the class to consider how the film might be understood as alternative media. Watch the clip.

*What is the film doing, saying, showing that defies the pattern we identified in dominant representations of WWII? What is the significance of this representation?*

- The film addresses the conflict in the Pacific, and specifically the US's use of nuclear weapons on Japan, which are not often represented in the dominant representations of WWII.
- The film privileges the perspective of the Japanese people, showing their suffering at the conclusion of the war, rather than focusing on an American victory.

### ***Assignment: Social Issue***

Assign the students to do some reflection and research on a social issue that (1) matters to them personally and (2) has been inadequately addressed in public discourse and mainstream media. Assign them to come to class with three research sources that address their chosen issue (including news stories, scholarly works, documentaries, etc.). Students can choose from a variety of social issues—from gender to the environment, political reform to religious tolerance, etc.—but ultimately should identify a contradiction between what IS happening and what OUGHT to be happening in the world.

## **Lesson 3: Videogames as Alternative Media**

### ***Objective***

By the end of the session, students should understand how videogames might serve as alternative media and be prepared to start making their “Game for Change.”

### ***Preparation***

Prepare Twine game:

- *Queers in Love at the End of the World* by Anna Anthropy  
<http://auntiepixelante.com/endoftheworld/>

### ***Play***

*Depression Quest* by Zoe Quinn, Patrick Lindsey & Isaac Schankler  
<http://www.depressionquest.com/>

### ***Demonstration: Twine***

Visit [twinery.org](http://twinery.org). Demonstrate to the class how to use the free, online software to create a simple, interactive text-based narrative. Direct students to the many Twine tutorials available on the

site's wiki. Encourage the students to experiment with the software—changing text, font size, color, adding images, sounds, and video, etc. Answer questions about Game for Change assignment.

### ***Discussion: Videogames and Social Change***

Invite students to consider the possibilities that games provide players to identify contradictions within society and advocate for positive social change.

*Videogames are commonly perceived as a distraction, so it may be counterintuitive to discuss games in relation to positive social change. How are games uniquely able to address social issues?*

- **INTERACTIVITY:** Games require the player to make decisions, take action, positioning the player as an agent of change.
- **IMMERSION:** Games often immerse players in new environments, allowing them to experience new situations.
- **IDENTIFICATION:** Games often allow players to inhabit new subjectivities, allowing them to understand others' perspectives.
- **PROCEDURAL RHETORIC:** Games require players to make decisions and experience consequences and therefore introduce the player to the causal networks at play in an issue (see Bogost 2007).

### ***Discussion: Depression Quest as Alternative Media***

Invite the students to share their experiences playing and making sense of *Depression Quest*.

*How does Depression Quest correspond with the definition of alternative media from last lesson?*

- It was produced independent of the industry.
- It utilizes structures, characters, and aesthetics that confront the conventional.
- It is counter-hegemonic—challenging dominant ideological perspectives.
- It allows marginalized communities to express themselves.
- It shines a light on suffering as a means of promoting action and change.

*What characteristics of videogames discussed earlier does it use in order to introduce the issue of living with depression to the player?*

- **INTERACTIVITY**
- **IMMERSION**
- **IDENTIFICATION**
- **PROCEDURAL RHETORIC**

An interesting characteristic of the game—and one often employed in social issue-oriented videogames—is the restriction of player choice. Bogost (2011) identifies this as *operationalized*

*weakness*. Rather than empower the player, the game limits the player's abilities in order to give some sense of the inequality inherent to the issue.

*Depression Quest* is a particularly complicated example of alternative media because, while the game was produced independent of the industry and sought to represent the experiences of a marginalized community, it became caught up in an attack against marginalized communities within the game industry and culture. Proponents of "Gamer-Gate" used the game as part of their efforts to attack women, LGBTQ people, people of color, even going so far as to attack the game's co-creator, Zoe Quinn.

### **Activity: Queers in Love at the End of the World Analysis**

Ask for a student volunteer to play the game (<http://auntiepixelante.com/endoftheworld/>) in front of the class. If the student chooses to do so, allow them to play the game multiple times with various outcomes. Contextualize the game for the class—*Queers in Love at the End of the World* was created by Anna Anthropy, a transgender game designer, as a means of addressing the existential crisis experienced by so many within the LGBTQ community. Along with Anthropy, the most prominent developers using Twine today are women and queer people who use the platform to address issues that face their communities (including mental illness, abuse, and discrimination).

Invite the students to reflect on how the game makes them feel and what elements of the game they feel effectively communicates the existential crisis faced by the LGBTQ community.

- The great variety of choices provided to the player of how they might express their love to their partner before the end of the world is juxtaposed with the 10-second timer that acts as an ominous reminder of the futility of any choice made.
- The fact that the player is never able to escape death is a departure from mainstream games in which players must live to win. This speaks to the inevitability of death—regardless of who we are—but also to the ill-fated end that so many LGBTQ persons (and relationships) have experienced and continue to experience.

### **Workshop: Social Issues**

Invite the students to work in groups of two to share the reflections and research they did on their chosen social issues. Encourage them to engage in a dialogue about:

- Their motivations for selecting a social issue
- The information they found in their research
- The dominant representations of the issue in public discourse and mainstream media—what patterns emerge from the student's research.
- Their reflections on these sources, as well as their own experiences with the issue
- The development of their personal perspective on the issue
- Some possible narrative, aesthetic, and thematic approaches they might take in creating their Twine game

## Lesson 4 – Playing & Reflecting

### *Objective*

By the end of the session, students should have shared their Games for Change, provided feedback on their projects, reflected on the assignment, and determined actions that they might make next.

### *Activity: Sharing Time*

Invite students to work in groups of two and share their Games for Change. Encourage students to play each other's games, ask questions, provide feedback, and reflect on the issues being addressed. After working in one group, have students switch partners and work in a second group, completing the same activity. Then invite students to share their experiences and observations with the class:

- *What new information/insights did you encounter in the assignment?*
- *How has your perspective on the social issue developed through the assignment?*
- *What were some challenges that the assignment presented to you?*
- *How will you approach your creative work differently based on the assignment?*
- *How will you engage with the social issue differently because of the assignment?*
- *What have you learned about the relationship between Media and Society as a result of this unit?*
- *Are there ways in which the assignment could be improved to make it more engaging/effective?*

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**Benjamin Thevenin**, Ph.D. ([benjaminthevenin.com](http://benjaminthevenin.com)) is an Assistant Professor of Media Arts and the Critical Studies Area Head at Brigham Young University's Department of Theatre and Media Arts. He received his PhD from the University of Colorado in Boulder. Benjamin's studies focus on the relationships between youth, media, and politics, and in particular, how we can better prepare young people to become thoughtful citizens, consumers, and creators of media. He teaches classes on creativity, children's media, new media, and media education. Benjamin also leads the Hands on a Camera project, a service-learning program in which BYU students teach media production and analysis skills to local youth. Benjamin lives with his wife and three boys in the beautiful Wasatch mountains.