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Character Creation: Gamification and Identity

Cathlena Martin

University of Montevallo, cmartin16@montevallo.edu

Benton Tyler

University of Montevallo, tylerbw@montevallo.edu

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Character Creation: Gamification and Identity

Overview

As opposed to game-based learning, which implements games and game design principles into a professor's pedagogy, gamification applies game activities vis-à-vis an overlay of typical gaming elements onto a standard curriculum. For example, in our Survey of Modern Games class for undergraduates at the University of Montevallo, we employ the following gamification techniques: displaying progress via boss fights and badges, employing narrative elements to create a cohesive semester-long story arc, and implementing a level-based grading system with experience points (XP). To introduce the gamification elements and lay the foundation for character analysis, we start the semester with a character creation assignment (which is labeled as a "dossier" to fit the overall theme) and a related discussion. Our use of a gamification assignment and follow-up discussion addresses ideological perceptions of identity via avatars and creates a safe space in the classroom for individualized student identities. The dossier task leads into discussions of gaming stereotypes and representation with an emphasis on challenging binaries present in this medium. While the assignment we outline is for a Survey of Modern Games class, it can easily be adapted to any course with narrative texts, be they literature, film, or games.

Rationale

Within higher education, two conversations regarding student learning are happening separately. One lobbies for student diversity and acceptance, and one touts using gamification for student engagement. Our assignment and subsequent discussion serve multiple purposes: first, to create a safe space for students to construct an identity via an avatar, either their perceived notion of self or a fictional façade; second, to provide a foundation to scaffold future discussions of character identity within video games; and third, to critically engage students regarding gaming stereotypes. In "Validating Culturally Diverse Students: Toward a New Model of Learning and Student Development," Laura Rendon concludes that faculty need to "fully engage in the validation of students" in order to allow students to "feel free to learn" and "feel free to be who they are" (Rendon 1994, 51). In a politically charged era where higher education leads the way in creating safe spaces for students of all backgrounds, ethnicities, genders, and sexual representations, we want to create a classroom environment where students may ascribe to traditional gendered pronouns, if that is their preference, and also where students can be free to enact a different identity. Speaking specifically in support of transgender students in a recent issue of *Liberal Education*, Ellen Bara Stolzenberg and Bryce Hughes lobby for this sort of inclusion by implementing policies "that allow students to use their preferred names and pronouns" over their legal ones (Stolzenberg and Hughes 2017, 42). Our assignment allows students to experiment and not feel constrained by societal norms of identity, while also supporting the learning objectives for the class.

Since video games (and literature, film) inhabit a myriad of worlds with zoomorphic and xenomorphic characters, avatar construction for this assignment should not be limited to humans or binary genders. We have had students who present sexualized stereotypes of bronzed,

muscular military men or buxom, leather-clad, high-heeled vixens. However, more often than not, students create three dimensional characters based on themselves but with added mystical or magical elements. We have had students who self-identify as animals use this assignment to be recognized as the animal of their choice. For example, one student imagined himself as a fox and another as a pony. Since many of our students play tabletop role-playing games, they easily see this assignment as an extension of their gaming lives integrated into an educational class. What they may not immediately see is that “engagement in roleplaying creates the potential for self-exploration in the form of identity alteration,” (Bowman 2007, 1) but hopefully, by the time our discussion of the psychology behind character creation concludes, they have a better understanding of their personal choice of avatar as intersecting with the ideological limitations some games impose on us. As Bowman states, roleplaying “accesses the potent reaches of the unconscious and allows a creative relationship between fantasy and reality, between the self and the alterego, and between the individual and the group” (2).

Role-playing and character creation also link with the current scholarship on gamification. In *The Gamification of Learning and Instruction*, Karl Kapp addresses character creation in his chapter on “Managing the Gamification Design Process” so that students can “choose a basic character type and then customize the eye, skin, hair, and clothing” with the idea to “represent diversity around the world” (Kapp 2012, 208-209). In *The Multiplayer Classroom*, Lee Sheldon goes more in depth and models having students create their own avatar with the required elements of a name, a visual representation, and a backstory that align with his themed, gamified class (Sheldon 2012, 154). While we have been influenced by others (Gee 2003, Presky 2001, Salen et al 2011, Squire 2011), we drew the most inspiration from Sheldon’s case study.

Our assignment provides a discussion segue into analysis of video game characters whether or not students decide to role-play their character longer than one class period (though cosplay is encouraged), thus helping to set-up the dichotomous nature of video games—the tension between the creative and the analytical where games are both an art and a science—while also challenging culturally accepted norms of identity.

Lesson and assignment objectives:

1. To help create a welcoming environment for students of all identities, establishing a tone of inclusivity, while engaging them through a creative outlet
2. To introduce gamification elements of the class via character creation
3. To critically engage students with existing stereotypes and representations in published video games
4. To familiarize students with grading expectations via a low stakes assignment

Student learning objectives for the lesson and assignment include:

1. To create and present a unique character
2. To analyze avatar construction as it relates to personal identity
3. To identify common stereotypes used in video games and to define the terms *avatar* and *agent*
4. To critically discuss stereotypes and representations in published video games

General Timeline

This lesson plan covers two hour and fifteen minute class periods that meet face-to-face, but it could easily be modified for an online course or for a shorter duration. First, create an individual, editable wiki page alphabetized under a dossier module in your learning management system for each student in your class. Then, assign the character creation dossier two class periods prior to the discussion. After the character creation dossier is assigned, the following class period is used for oral presentations. The following class period is discussion-based. We usually present this assignment on the first day of class so that it can be used as a student introduction tool and so that students have a character they can role-play throughout the course. However, this lesson plan can be assigned at any point during the semester as a creative introduction to discussing identity and stereotypes in video games and does not have to include the continued role-play aspect.

Detailed Lesson Plan

At the end of the class period prior to the presentation day, assign students the dossier in which they create a character. Allow 15-20 minutes in order to thoroughly cover the assignment, your expectations, the rubric, and to address any student questions. We post the following assignment instructions using the online class learning management system Canvas.

Assignment Instructions

Character Creation Dossier (up to 25 XP): In Canvas you will find a file titled “your last name, your first name” under Modules/Dossier. Answer the question, “If you were a new, fictional video game character, who would you be?” by composing a character overview. Include the following: your character’s name, a biography and description of your character, a description of the game (fictional or published) your character is in, any skills or abilities your character has, and any hindrances your character has. Include an image that captures the feel of your character or best represents them. You may include any additional information that helps fully portray your character.

Presentation Day

Begin the class period by logging in to your learning management system and opening the module that contains all of the student files. We have found it works best if you show students how to navigate between the files before they begin their presentation so that you do not have to moderate the technology, but instead can have students present one after another with no break. Depending on the size of the class (ours typically have 20-24 students), this usually takes an hour, leaving just enough time to assign the homework reading for the next class period. Instruct students to read pages 3-14 of “Videogames, Avatars, and Identity: A Brief History,” which is part of the first chapter of Zach Waggoner’s 2009 book *My Avatar, My Self*. This reading not only grounds the discussion for the following class period, but also prefaces the history of video games unit we begin in week three by providing a condensed video game history. The reading also foreshadows our concise survey of tabletop role-playing games we cover much later in the semester. When introducing the text, we ask students to pay particular attention to the meaning

of the term *avatar* as opposed to the term *agent*. Using Waggoner's definition, an avatar represents the user within a game. With an avatar, a player has choice in its creation and the avatar's characteristics—including but not limited to appearance, skills, or attributes—can change. For example, a created character is our Chiss male bounty hunter, Asparax, in *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. This is opposed to an agent that can simply be controlled within a game but never changes, such as Pac-Man.

Discussion Day

In future class periods we use the student's avatar name exclusively as this ties in with the gamification element of the course, but for this day we start class by calling roll using both a student's preferred name and their avatar name. We then begin our discussion on the homework reading by asking students to call out names of playable video game characters, which we write on the board. After we have 10-15 names, we go back through each character individually and vote on if the character is an avatar or an agent, based on the homework reading's definition, stopping after the first name to discuss whichever term they voted on. For example, if Pac-Man was the first character listed and the class voted for "agent," we pause and ask them why Pac-Man is an agent versus an avatar. Ideally they will answer that he cannot be altered by the player and that his skill levels or aesthetics never change over the course of the game. These are common characteristics that define an agent. If they do correctly define agent based on the reading then we move on to the next character. When they vote on avatar for a character, we pause and cover how the reading defines avatar. We continue until all characters have been labeled as either an avatar or an agent by a majority vote with appropriate discussions on each character as needed.

After the class has discussed the difference between avatar and agent, ask the class to self-select into groups of four to five students each. In their homework reading, Waggoner asks the question, "do other v-RPGers care as much about their avatars as I do about mine?" (Waggoner 2009, 4). Ask students to discuss in their small groups their personal attachments to a video game avatar and if indeed they do care as much about their avatars as Waggoner does. We have found that opening the discussion with a personal connection and then moving to a more critical engagement with the text leads to a higher participation rate.

After students have had 10-15 minutes to discuss the first question, we ask the following: "Are you more or less likely to play a character who is similar to you, and why?" This is meant to fuel discussion of avatars as they relate to personal identity. After 10 or so minutes, ask them to share in their groups what part of the avatar they presented earlier was based on themselves.

For the final small group discussion questions, ask the students, "What player characters (agents or avatars) do you see over and over again in games? I.e., what are the traditional stereotypes that you see used for video game characters? And, on the flip side, can you list examples of underrepresented identities in video games?" After 10-15 minutes, ask the students if any of their avatars from their presentation break away from these stereotypes. This should bridge the personal discussion with the critical discussion of representation and stereotypes in video games. Once students have talked through the small group discussion questions, bring them back together as a class.

We have found that we gain the most participation via small group discussion, but it is important to leave time at the end of class to bring everyone back together and summarize what the individual groups have discussed, allowing the professor to make connections to the reading as applicable.

We conclude the class period by forecasting what students have to look forward to in the weeks ahead as it connects to our reading, highlighting the history of video games unit we will cover in the following week, as well as the survey of modern board and tabletop games we will cover in week 10, which includes two days on tabletop role-playing games.

Teaching materials

Rubric

In keeping with the gamification format, our rubric reflects naming conventions derived from role-playing game attributes, traits, and talents. For example, instead of oral presentation or public speaking, we use charisma. Since this rubric is for the first assignment that includes an oral component, charisma is ranked at level one. These skill levels then increase over the course of the semester as more assignments require advanced levels of these same competencies. This numerical progression statistically reinforces the notion that a student's character is an avatar (as opposed to an agent) since they are accruing points and increasing their competencies in various skills such as written communication and public speaking.

Dossier							
Criteria	Ratings						Points
😊 Charisma Lvl 1 view longer description threshold: 4.0 pts	Exemplary 5.0 pts	Strong 4.0 pts	Good 3.0 pts	OK 2.0 pts	Problematic 1.0 pts	Lacking 0.0 pts	5.0 pts
📖 Completionist Lvl 1 view longer description threshold: 5.0 pts	100% complete 5.0 pts	Missing minor parts 3.0 pts		Missing major parts 1.0 pts		Lacking 0.0 pts	5.0 pts
💡 Creativity Lvl 1 view longer description threshold: 4.0 pts	Exemplary 5.0 pts	Strong 4.0 pts	Good 3.0 pts	OK 2.0 pts	Problematic 1.0 pts	Lacking 0.0 pts	5.0 pts
🕒 Punctuality Lvl 1 view longer description threshold: 5.0 pts	On time 5.0 pts	Late 3.0 pts		Very late 1.0 pts		Lacking 0.0 pts	5.0 pts
📝 Scribner Lvl 1 view longer description threshold: 4.0 pts	Exemplary 5.0 pts	Strong 4.0 pts	Good 3.0 pts	OK 2.0 pts	Problematic 1.0 pts	Lacking 0.0 pts	5.0 pts
Total Points: 25							

Additional Reading

We prefer Waggoner's chapter because it is accessible to sophomore undergraduate students, who are the largest demographic of our particular 200-level class. If this course were geared towards upper level or graduate students, we would increase the reading requirement. Here are a

few suggestions for either additional student reading, background reading for the professor, or for expanding the discussion into other aspects of video games and identity. For a more in-depth analysis of MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) and identity, we propose Miroslaw Filiciak's "Hyperidentities." For a discussion on playing pre-designed characters as opposed to self-constructed avatars, specifically using Cloud from *Final Fantasy* as an example, we suggest "Playing Roles" by Andrew Burn. For research on masculine identities, specifically with *Call of Duty*, we recommend "Proving Grounds" by Gareth Healey. And finally, for more on identity politics, we endorse Lisa Nakamura's concise articles "Race in/for Cyberspace," "After/Images of Identity," and "Don't Hate the Player, Hate the Game." Her articles pair well with the edited collection *Race in Cyberspace*, which provides a more wide-ranging discussion on race and ethnicity via identity tourism.

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Biography

Cathlena Martin
University of Montevallo
cmartin16@montevallo.edu

Cathlena Martin is an assistant professor and coordinator of Game Studies and Design (GSD) at the University of Montevallo. She received her Ph.D. in English from the University of Florida. Her research interests include children's literature and games, game-based learning, and the history of games. Her publications cover topics like *Peter Pan* and video games, play in *Ender's Game*, and game adaptations of children's texts. She has a published, co-authored article with Dr. Tyler on the influence of table-top role-playing games on board and card games.

Benton Tyler
University of Montevallo
tylerbw@montevallo.edu

Benton Tyler is a professor of mathematics at the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Alabama. He received his Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Mississippi. His research interests and publications lie primarily in the fields of combinatorics and game theory. He has a co-authored article with Dr. Martin on the influence of table-top role-playing games on board and card games.