

CHID496F: Close Playing Play Log, or, “Plogs”

chid 496 / sec. F / winter quarter 2011 / chang & welsch

Close playing, like close reading, requires careful and critical attention to how the game is played (or not played), to what kind of game it is, to what the game looks like or sounds like, to what the game world is like, to what choices are offered (or not offered) to the player, to what the goals of the game are, to how the game interacts with and addresses the player, to how the game fits into the real world, and so on. As Constance Steinkuehler says, most games like MMORPGs are “indeed a constellation of literary practices” (301). And James Paul Gee says, “Video games have an unmet potential to create complexity by letting people experience the world from different perspectives” (151). But before we can take video games as serious objects of study, we need to develop ways to study them. In other words, how do you close play a video game? How do you develop a practice of close playing?

Goals and Outcomes

Over the course of the quarter and your play through of *Bioshock*, you will be required to keep a running play log or “plog.” These short, analytical and observational writings serve as reactions to, close readings of, and analyses of the game, texts, play, and the connections you see, read, and talk about in class. Your plogs are more than just summaries or personal reactions. You will play, observe, and gather what you see, hear, do, and think about as you play the game. This close playing “data” will then help you form critical, analytical responses.

Playing While Awake

For every week, every section or “level” of the game, you must actively take notes while you play. These observations and initial responses should include details about:

- Narrative (the game’s story, themes, characters, dialogue)
- Mise en scene (visuals, sounds, items, setting)
- Mechanics (controls, actions, interface, rules, exploits)
- Cultural/Social context (player communities, non-gaming communities, news, laws and policies, race, gender, sexuality, class, connections to different disciplines)

For every plog, identify and briefly describe at least **five** observations per category. In other words, what are the things you see, hear, or do. This can be a simple, three-column list in a notebook where you keep a running list and describe each thing you notice during game play. For example:

Narrative Feature	Mise En Scene	Mechanics	Cultural/Social
<i>Main character is a man. No name.</i>	<i>1940s-50s Art Deco architecture and interior design.</i>	<i>Conventional first person shooter perspective of hands, gun, weapons.</i>	<i>Critical acclaim from gaming industry/game fans.</i>
<i>Plane crash in open sea. You must go to the tower.</i>			<i>Playing from the perspective of a man only.</i>
<i>Horror and mystery genres.</i>			

Try to select different and distinct things (five or more for each column) each time you sit down to plog.

Playing with a Critical Observer, or, Peer Playing

Beyond solo play, another way to close play a game is to pair up or group up. One person plays while the other person or people observe and write down their observations and reactions. Paired playing, much like peer review for writing, allows you to get a different set of eyes and ears as you go through the close playing process. The burden of trying to pay attention to noticing and noting things while playing is lifted from the player and given to the critical observer. Play through a section of the game and then switch places: the player becomes the peer observer and the observer becomes the player. Once each person has had an opportunity to play and take notes, sit down and discuss your experiences and observations together.

Close Playing Response

Once you have collected your close playing details for the week, go back and look through your play logs and generate a short critical response to what you have seen, experienced, and played. In other words, in one or two paragraphs, write about a common thread or developing pattern in your logs or write about a tension or contradiction that seems to be troubling or write about connections you are making between the different levels of close playing. These close playing responses take the descriptive details that you have gathered and try to address one specific and analytical concern. For example:

- What does the game do with genre? Narrative genre? Gaming genre?
- How does the game's narrative connect to the game's mechanics?
- Do the mechanics of the game add to or detract from the game experience? Why?
- Is there a critical connection between the game and the broader social and cultural context?
- Does the game tell us something about race, gender, sexuality, nation?
- How might we use the game to theorize about "fun" or "play" or "game"?
- What is the game arguing? What is the game about in a critical sense?

Over the course of the class, use your plogs to help you during class discussion and play. Furthermore, you will be asked to present or post your plogs and close playing responses from time to time.