A Practical Guide to Close Playing: A Workshop

Friday | September 27, 2024 | 11:00 AM-12:45 PM
Alt+F4: Rebooting Community after GamerGate
Lawrence Technological University | Southfield, MI

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This interactive workshop presents a set of pedagogical frames, in-game activities, and playful lessons for the teaching and analyzing of digital games, particularly in literary and humanities contexts. The only way to learn to analyze video games is to play them; the only way to develop much-needed digital proficiencies and literacies for games (and other algorithmic texts), is to theorize them. Through a play-oriented approach, this workshop offers practical demonstrations of how games make meaning and how they participate in contemporary digital culture. In doing so, it prepares teachers to train a next generation of scholars to engage and contribute to urgent conversations about AI, virtuality, diversity, representation, agency, community, and play.

Workshop Agenda
- Welcome
- Introductions & Framing
- Play Logs
- Close Play with Tim
- Close Play with Ashlee
- Close Play with Ed
- Q&A

Some of the material here has been adapted from a forthcoming book by Edmond Y. Chang and Timothy J. Welsh, *Video Games, Literature, and Close Playing* [working title], Routledge, in press/forthcoming 2025.

Teaching (with) Games Philosophy:

Teaching with video games offers unique pedagogical opportunities and medium-specific challenges, which require particular attention to reading and playing "literacies," to careful ludic and analytical framing, and to access. On the one hand, video games are not the promised land inhabited by digital "natives." On the other hand, they are a worthwhile, playable, popular medium and art. In other words, video games cannot be a gimmick or dangling digital carrot, but rather video games must be the artifacts and occasions for study, investigation, discussion, and interrogation. To assume that students, even students born in the 21st Century, are ready to read and think and write critically about digital media naturalizes these technologies in problematic ways. It gives students the false impression that they have nothing to learn about their own relationship to the technology they have, use, buy, abuse, play, or ignore. Familiarity is not the same as facility; acceptance is not the same thing as acumen.

Close Playing:

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. Our students were required to keep close playing play logs or "plogs," recording what they see, hear, do, and think about as they play and paying attention to narrative, mise en scene, mechanics, and social/cultural contexts.

Paired Playing:

Beyond solo play, our students practiced the close playing technique of paired (or group) play. One person plays while the other (or others) observe, respond with, 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. Players play through a section of the game and then switch places: the player becomes the peer observer and the observer becomes the player. Paired playing allows for conversation, discussion, cooperation, and collaboration in both navigating and analyzing the game.

Teaching (with) Video Games Successes & Advantages:

- Fun: engages many students in their area of knowledge, something they have experience and skill in
- Close playing: encourages students played more slowly, more deliberately, paying attention details
- Playing awake: activity and interactivity, changes the approach to play from strategic/goal-oriented to exploratory/experimental
- All games are "serious": game genres are open ended, not just "serious" or "art" games can be analyzed, AAA games can be taken "seriously" too
- Multimodal and engages multiple learning styles
- Play across disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, education, sociology, computer science, art, and politics

- Teaches close reading, close playing, but also stepping back, looking at the bigger picture
- Cutting edge, creative possibilities

Teaching (with) Video Games Challenges & Limitations:

- Cost and access
- Critical frames: managing student expectations (i.e. "It's just a game!" or games not "serious/academic")
- Games do not have to be "fun" and you don't have to play for fun
- Playing asleep: playing only for fun, entertainment, distraction, escape
- Student interest/skill/knowledge (i.e. not all students play or like video games; varying degrees of experience or skill with games)
- Different types/genres of games appeal to different people
- Goal-oriented mindset: understanding that it is not always about winning or losing
- Challenging "mastery": being good at a game doesn't mean you are prepared to analyze it
- Selecting games, problematic game content, time and space constraints
- Game studies and game pedagogy is still developing, needs diversity

Tips, Tricks, & Advice:

- Don't defend including games: provide frames, lenses, key concepts
- If you take games seriously, they will take it seriously
- Remediation: draw nuanced connection and analogy to other familiar media (novels, films, music, analog games, sports)
- Stick close to the text, close read, and close play
- Focus on play not just narrative or game progress
- Demonstrate, use save points, use walkthroughs and game play videos
- Simple games for complex ideas
- Use free, shareware, and trial games
- Encourage shared or group play
- Take advantage of existing campus resources (esports facility, setting up a single station in a computer lab, using office hours for access to games)

Suggested Readings:

Anthropy, Anna. "The Problem of Videogames," *Rise of the Videogame Zinesters*, Seven Stories Press, 2012, pp. 1-21.

Bogost, Ian. *How to Do Things with Video Games*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

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Chang, Edmond Y., Kishonna L. Gray, and Ashlee Bird. "Playing Difference: Towards a Games of Colour Pedagogy," in *Critical Pedagogy, Race, and Media Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education Teaching*, edited by Susan Flynn and Melanie A. Marotta, Routledge, 2002, pp. 111-128.

Condis, Megan Amber and Mike Sell. *Ready Reader One: The Stories We Tell with, about, and around Videogames*, LSU Press, 2024.

Consalvo, Mia and Christopher A. *Real Games: What's Legitimate and What's Not in Contemporary Videogames*, MIT Press, 2019.

Gee, James Paul. *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*, St. Martin's Griffin, 2007.

Gray, Kishonna L. and David J. Leonard. *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice*, University of Washington Press, 2018.

Malkowski, Jennifer and TreaAndrea M. Russworm, Eds. *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*, Indiana University Press, 2017.

Payne, Matthew Thomas. "Play," *Keywords for Media Studies*, edited by Laurie Ouellette and Jonathan Gray, NYU Press, 2017, pp. 138-140.

Pugh, Tison and Lynn Ramey, Eds. *Teaching Games and Game Studies in the Literature Classroom*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2022.

Trammell, Aaron. *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology*, MIT Press, 2023.