

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO CLOSE PLAYING: A WORKSHOP

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AGENDA

- I. Welcome
- II. Introductions
& Framing
- III. Play Logs
- IV. Close Play
with Tim
- V. Close Play
with Ashlee
- VI. Close Play
with Ed
- VII. Q&A



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.

CLOSE PLAYING



How do you teach students to critically, analytically play video games? Akin to the same sort of problem in the composition or literature classroom, the challenge of getting students to see, “read,” play a game beyond the level of enjoyment is all about training and practicing a skill with which they have little experience or desire...

The takeaway here is that close playing is understanding the intersection of form, function, meaning, audience, and action. It is an attention to more than just the content of the game, more than just the mechanics, more than the graphics, and more than just the designers’ or developers’ intentions. Knowing how to play a game is not enough. Knowing what the game is about is not enough. And knowing how the game works, even at the level of programming or platform, is not enough.

-Chang & Welsh, *Video Games, Literature, & Close Playing*, Routledge, forthcoming 2025.

CLOSE PLAYING (CONT.)



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.

-Chang, "Gaming as Writing, or, World of Warcraft as World of Wordcraft,"

Computers and Composition Online, 2008

Games are pedagogical. Everything about a game is designed to instruct and inform the player including interface, menus, help screens, in-game narratives, mechanics, music, sound effects, cutscenes, visual design as well as paratexts like user's manuals, walkthroughs, cheat codes, fan websites, and so on. Ultimately, what is most important is to acknowledge and address that games, as Gray and Leonard (2018) argue in the introduction of *Woke Gaming*, are often problematically pedagogical in the naturalised ways they 'provide opportunities to both learn and share the language of racism and sexism, and the grammar of empire, all while perpetuating cultures of violence and privilege' (pp. 6-7): The potential for video games to teach, the desire to teach with video games, and the necessity for games (and gaming communities and industry) to address racism, sexism, phobia, and other oppressions cannot begin without reckoning with the above concerns and questions.

-Chang, Gray, Bird, "Playing Difference: Toward a Games of Colour Pedagogy"

We believe that close playing offers ways for students to not just “read” video games but play them critically and analytically. That close playing, unlike traditional New Critical close reading, is more than just noticing textual minutiae but pulling together multimodal, multilayered evidence and experience—from game story to game world to game mechanics to platform to player communities to cultural context. Teaching students to close-play, therefore, is about teaching them to make meanings within contexts and community.

-Chang & Welsh, *Video Games, Literature, & Close-Playing*,
Routledge, forthcoming 2025.

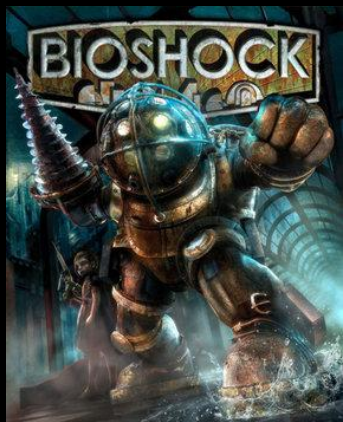
...the focus [should be] on the need for critical interventions and medium-specific pedagogies to address the fact that games are embedded in the fabric of everyday life and more importantly embedded with the norms, values, promises, and problems of the culture at large.

-Chang, Gray, Bird, “Playing Difference: Toward a Games of Colour Pedagogy”

CLOSE PLAYING

WITH TIM

BIOSHOCK (2007)



Irrational Games
(2k Boston, 2007)

Microsoft Windows |
Xbox 360 | PlayStation 3 |
Mac OS X | iOS



- Learning to teach (with) videogames
 - Bioshock: Cyborg Morality and Posthuman Choice (2009)
 - “Why So Serious?: Video Games as Persuasion, Propaganda, and Politics” (2010)
 - “Close Playing, or, Bioshock as Practicum” (2011)

BIOSHOCK (CONT.)



Video games, like literature, teach you to “read” them in the beginning. But, because they are designed to facilitate interaction, it is easy to miss the framing if we think we know what we are doing and move too quickly.

- What stands out when we play slowly?
- What can we notice when we take time to observe how the game directs attention and how it frames interaction?



BIOSHOCK
(2007)



CLOSE PLAYING

WITH ASHLEE

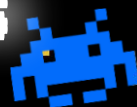
THE
UNFINISHED
SWAN (2012)



SUPER MEAT-
BOY (2010)
AND
FIREWATCH
(2016)



CLOSE PLAYING QUESTIONS



- How is space tied to narrative?
- How is it tied to genre?
- What doesn't this game have that others you have played do?
- How does the game teach us? Mechanically? Narratively? Visually? Spatially?
- How does the game create the narrative and its characters?
- How does the game construct relationships?
- Is the environment/physical space of the game a character?

CLOSE PLAYING

WITH ED

YELLOW FACE (MIKE YI REN, 2019)



The game dramatizes not only the everyday micro-and-macro-aggressions experienced by Asian and other racialized bodies but gestures at the critical potential of games that do more than treat race as a ludic or representational fantasy.

-Chang, "Gaming While Asian," *Made in Asia/America*, Duke UP, 2024

THANK YOU

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