

Game Play Logs, Or, “Plogs”

eng 3850 / autumn 2018 / ohio university / chang



Johan Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* defines play as “a free activity standing quite consciously outside the ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (as qtd. in Bogost *Unit Operations* 115). He extends his definition of play with the metaphor of the “magic circle” – a safe space and place of play, “the arena, the card table, the magic circle...are all in form and function playgrounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules

obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart” (as qtd. in Bogost 134).

Close Reading, Close Playing, Critical Playing

However, games are not perfect magic circles of play, they are not completely separate from the “real world,” and for many game studies scholars, it is where the game and the world, the game and the culture intersect, inform one another, influence one another that is important to pay close attention to. From your previous composition and literature classes you should have some experience with “close reading” a text, getting between the words and lines, getting past the symbolic or the thematic. Close playing is no different, only the text will be something you “play.” 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. Therefore, as you play and think and “plog” about the games this semester, tell us about what you are paying attention to, what you are noticing, and most importantly, what connections you are making between the game and the real world, between the game and class discussion, and between the game and the readings. No detail is too small or inconsequential. The whole point of close playing is to aggregate analytical and interpretative data that can be then used to make an argument about the games and the culture that made and play them. In other words, if you had to write a paper about the game, based on the kinds of analytics we will be talking about in class, how would you use the game itself and your playing of the game as evidence? That kind of detail and analysis is what close playing is all about.

Weekly Plogs

Approximately each week, for this assignment, you will play or interact with the games or texts assigned for the week. Go ahead and play them once just to get a feel of the controls and a feel for the game’s design, sounds, images, actions, goals, characters, and story (if there are these things). Then start over and play the game paying attention to things that catch your attention, that leave you asking questions, that connect to the week’s theoretical readings or class discussion. In other words, are there ways the game reveals something or critiques something about the world around us, the culture around us (intentionally or unintentionally)? Consider the following as jumping off points (not as a laundry list needing answers):

- What are the explicit goals of the game (e.g. kill all the bad guys) and more important, what are the implicit goals of the game (e.g. kill all the bad guys for the government)?
- What are the main arguments of the game (these may not be explicit), what is the game persuading you of, how are the arguments tied into game play?
- How might you close read game play and game mechanics and game design? What is open to the player? How is the player limited? How does that connect to larger concerns or politics?
- Consider the keywords as touchstones. What does the game tell us about cultural and identity formations like race, class, gender, sex, sexuality, nationality, citizenship?
- How did the game making you feel, and more importantly, how did the game make you think? How do you connect these feelings and thoughts to larger concerns?

Pick one of the games to write about (or connect games). Your plog must be more than just description, summary of plot, characters, setting, themes, and a walk-through of what you did, though of course these

things will be evidence for your analysis. Find one or two things that caught your attention or that seem to need analyzing and start that line of thinking. Outstanding plogs are one or two substantive paragraphs, focus on specific close playing details, and make direct connections between the week's game and the week's readings. As the plogs get filled out, feel free to reference another person's take on game play, build off of someone else's argument making sure to make your own, connect to or challenge another plog's argument.

Guidelines and Due Dates

Format: on one of the week's games, the week's readings, a plog in the same thread, reflective but academic, 250-500 words, typed, no title page, single-spaced, block format academic writing, include bibliography or useful links if necessary posted to the class Blackboard, responding to the appropriate thread

Due: approximately each week, Sunday, by 11:59 PM, posted to the week's plog thread

Playing Awake, Plog Worksheet

To help you generate your plog entries, use the following brainstorming and observation-taking exercise, which will help you "play while awake." For every week and each 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 each game, try to 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, four-column list in a notebook where you keep a running list and describe each thing you notice during game play. For example:

Narrative Feature (the game's story, themes, characters, dialogue)	Mise En Scene (visuals, sounds, items, setting)	Mechanics (controls, actions, interface, rules, exploits)	Cultural/Social (communities, news, laws and policies, race, gender, sexuality, class, connections to different disciplines)
<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>Spooky atmosphere, very wet.</i>	<i>Tape recorded journals for exposition.</i>	<i>Playing from the perspective of a man only.</i>

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.