#WeNeedDiverseGames: Close Playing Gender, Sexuality, and Race in Games

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In *Gaming* (2006), Alexander Galloway argues, "Video games render social realities into playable form" and "play is a symbolic action for larger issues in culture." As gaming communities and the gaming industry attempt to address the need for diversity and inclusion in games, how might we understand how the algorithmic underpinnings of programming and game design allow for and problematically constrain and recuperate queerness and difference? Or how might we unpack the ways characters of color are often rendered as either lighter-skinned protagonists or darker-skinned enemies? Central to this workshop is the definition and demonstration of close playing or critical ways of analyzing, engaging, and even teaching games to address gender, sexuality, and race in digital games.

Workshop Agenda
- Framing the Conversation: Lack of Diversity in Games; Backlash Against Feminist, Queer, & Intersectional Analysis of Games; Critical Analysis of Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Digital Games
- Workshop on Sample Games, What is Close Playing? & Sample Assignment: Plogs
- Teaching (with) Digital Games Successes & Advantages, Challenges & Limitations
- Q&A

Some of the material here has been adapted from several video game courses including CHID 496 F: "Close Playing, or, Bioshock as Practicum" (Winter 2011, http://www.timothyjwelsh.com/courses/496wi11/) and materials developed for the UW Teaching & Learning Symposium 2010 & 2011, co-taught and co-presented with Timothy Welsh. See also my blog post "Close Playing, a Meditation:" http://www.edmondchang.com/2010/11/11/close-playing-a-meditation/

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.

Teaching (with) Video Games Successes & Advantages:

- Fun: engages students in their area of knowledge, something they have experience & skill in
- Engages multiple learning styles
- Playing awake: activity and interactivity
- Play across disciplines, including literature, cultural studies, education, sociology, computer science, art, and politics
- Teaches close reading, close playing
- Teaches distant reading, distant playing

Teaching (with) Video Games Challenges & Limitations:

- Critical Frames: Managing Student Expectations
     "It's just a game!" or games not "serious/academic"

Playing asleep: playing only for fun, entertainment, distraction, escape
▪ Student Interest/Skill/Knowledge
    ▪ 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
    ▪ It's not always about winning or losing
    ▪ Proficiency or skill at playing games is different from the ability to critically analyze games
▪ Selecting Games, Problematic Game Content
▪ Cost and Access
▪ Game Studies and Game Pedagogy is New

Tips, Tricks, & Advice:

▪ Don't Defend: 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)
▪ Stick Close to the Text, Close Read & Close Play
▪ Focus on Play Not Narrative or Progress
▪ Demonstrate, Use Save Points, Use Walkthroughs and Game Play Videos (YouTube)
▪ Simple Games for Complex Ideas
▪ Use Free, Shareware, and Trial Games
▪ Encourage Shared or Group Play, Set Up a Play Station in a Computer Lab or During Office Hours

Suggested Reading:

By Edmond Y. Chang

"Critical Approaches to Virtual Worlds, Video Games, and *Ready Player One*." ENG 3850 Course Website. Autumn 2018. http://edmondchang.com/courses/3850

"A Game Chooses, A Player Obeys: *BioShock*, Posthumanism, and the Limits of Queerness." *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*.

"Queergaming." *Queer Game Studies*.

"Cards Against Humanity is _____." *First Person Scholar*. March 17, 2015. Part of the special feature "Videogames, Queerness, & Beyond Dispatches from the 2014 Queerness & Games Conference." http://www.firstpersonscholar.com/cards-against-humanity-is/.

"Love is in the Air: Queer (Im)possibility and Straightwashing in FrontierVille and World of Warcraft." *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*. Volume 2, Issue 2.

"Gaming as Writing, Or, World of Warcraft as World of Wordcraft." August/ September 2008 for *Computers and Composition Online* special issue on "Reading Games: Composition, Literacy, and Video Gaming." http://www.bgsu.edu/cconline/gaming_issue_2008/ed_welcome_gaming_2008.htm.

Video Game Studies (More Generally)

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Chen, Mark. *Leet Noobs: The Life and Death of an Expert Player Group in World of Warcraft*.
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Wark, McKenzie. *Gamer Theory*.

Race

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Sisler, Vit. "Digital Arabs: Representation in Video Games." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 11.2 (2008): 203-219.

Gender/Sexuality

Condis, Megan. "No Homosexuals in Star Wars? BioWare, 'Gamer' Identity, and the Politics of Privilege in a Convergence Culture." *Convergence* (2015).
Kopas, Merritt. *Video Games for Humans*.
Morris, Charles and Thomas Nakayama, Eds. *QED: A Journal of GLBTQ Worldmaking*. 2.2 (2015). Special essay on queer games: http://msupress.org/journals/issue/?id=50-21D-5EF
Nardi, Bonnie A. *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*.
Ruberg, Bonnie & Adrienne Shaw, Eds. *Queer Game Studies*.
Ruberg, Bonnie, Ed. *Queerness and Games Conference* at First Person Scholar. A number of essays: http://ourglasslake.com/2015/03/queerness-and-games-at-first-person-scholar/
Ruberg, Bonnie. "No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt." *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking*. 2.2 (Summer 2015): 108-124.
Sarkeesina, Anita. *Feminist Frequency*. https://feministfrequency.com/
Shaw, Adrienne. *Gaming at the Edge*.
Sundén, Jenny and Malin Sveningsson. *Gender and Sexuality in Online Game Cultures: Passionate Play*.
Stabile, Carol. "'I Will Own You': Accountability in Massively Multiplayer Online Games." *Television and New Media*. 15.1 (2014): 43-57.
Wysocki, Matthew and Evan W. Lauteria, Eds. *Rated M for Mature*.

Documentary

Digital Nation. 2010.
Second Skin. 2008.

Game Play Logs, Or, "Plogs"

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 at 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)
Main character is a man. No name.	1940s-50s Art Deco architecture and interior design.	Conventional first person shooter perspective of hands, gun, weapons.	Critical acclaim from gaming industry/game fans.
Plane crash in open sea. You must go to the tower.	Spooky atmosphere, very wet.	Tape recorded journals for exposition.	Playing from the perspective of a man only.

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 Plog Worksheet

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)