ED(MOND)CHANG(ED)AGOGY

Read. Write. Play. Teach.

👤 by edmondchang   🕐 November 11, 2010

Close Playing, a Meditation on Teaching (with) Video Games

Tim Welsh and I have been putting together and co-teaching video game focus group courses (through the Comparative History of Ideas program) over the last year or so. These 2-credit, non-graded, informal discussion sections (ostensibly a more "pure" seminar setting) have been an incredible opportunity for both of us to address an absence in the curricula of the university, to develop an intellectual community of fellow video game scholars and enthusiasts, to encourage undergraduates to pursue critical video game studies (a kind of digital humanities approach), and to challenge our own individual pedagogical and

"No, you weren't downloaded. Your were born."

academic work. One central recurring concern that runs through our conceptions and teachings of these CHID courses is: How do you teach students to critically, analytically play video games?

Akin 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–even desire to learn. When I broach the issue of reading practice with my writing or literature students, often couched in terms of "close reading," the response is usually one of defensive denial ("I already know how to read"), distress ("I have never been a good reader"), resistance ("You're reading too much into things"), and even hostility ("You're trying to indoc-

trinate me"). I sense that most of these responses result from the confusing messages students get about reading as constructed by (neo)liberal ideology as being one of the three basic intellectual and academic skills (reading, writing, and arithmetic), a tension that pits "you should know how to do this" against the logic that "unless you're an English major, you don't need to know how to do this." I am reminded of David Bartholomae's oft cited essay "Inventing the University" and his central argument that every time a student writes–and I would argue reads–for our classes, "he [or she] has to invent the university for the occasion…[t]he student has to learn to speak our language, to speak as we do, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community." In this case, they also must learn to read our language, to read as we do, to see, select, paraphrase, digest, and analyze the various texts we present them–from assignment prompts to novels to academic essays to statistics to examples from popular culture.

(As an aside, I could very well be writing this post about the teaching of popular fiction like *Harry Potter* or *Twilight* or everyday texts like television commercials or mainstream movies. There are differences, of course, across media and genre, but the trouble with reading closely and reading critically is analogous.)

Close reading needs to be framed in ways that translate the practice as more than just "reading between the lines" or "reading thematically." Rather, close reading like good writing is about purpose, relevance, focus, and stakes. I teach close reading using a three-tiered model (the metaphor is simple enough though there are plenty of other ways to attend to this). One: reading for fun. Two: reading for information. Three: reading for analysis or argumentation. These generally overlap with my three tiers of close reading practice. One: reading for literal or literary goals (e.g. plot, characters, themes, pleasure). Two: reading for rhetorical analysis (e.g. articulating rhetorical features). Three: reading for cultural or political analysis (e.g. how does the argument connect to a broader context). I stress to students that close reading (for me) is more than just noticing what is going on in a text or what the text is about (this is what my colleague Jane Lee calls "birdwatching"). Close reading is about drawing connections, making interpretative leaps, and analyzing how a text is making an argument and why these connections or analyses matter. For the most part, students grasp the fact that they need to find details and explicate them, but they usually stop at summary and exemplification. They are adept at picking out passages, quotations, claims, and evidence, but they are challenged by putting these things to use in their own arguments or transforming them from inert description to active analysis.

Herein is the extended challenge of teaching how to close read–or as I like to call it, close play–a video game. The commonplace arguments made by pedagogues about the assumed skill and literacy that students of this day and age have with digital media is totally exaggerated or misplaced. Claims

about "digital natives" is not only techno-orientalist but also obscuring of the problems of "learning our language" as described by Bartholomae. To assume that students, even students born in the 21st Century, are plug-and-play ready to read and think and write critically about digital media invisibilizes and naturalizes technologies in problematic ways. It also gives students the false impression that they have nothing to learn about their own relationship to the technology they have, use, buy, abuse, enfranchise, or ignore. Familiarity is not the same as facility; acceptance is not the same thing as acumen.

In an online article I wrote about writing and gaming (see "Gaming as Writing, Or, World of Warcraft as World of Wordcraft" in Fall 2008 *Computers and Composition* Special Issue: Reading Games) I try my hand at trying to tackle, albeit sophmorically, a definition of 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. Close playing is about revealing and analyzing what Galloway calls the diegetic and nondiegetic spaces and features of the game. The diegetic space of a video game "is the game's total world of narrative action. As with cinema, video game diegesis includes both onscreen and offscreen elements" (Galloway, 2006, p. 7) including characters, settings, actions, and events shown or made reference to. The nondiegetic spaces of a video game are "those elements of the gaming apparatus that are external to the world of narrative action" (p. 7) including score, titles, heads-up displays, and pause buttons. In video games, the diegetic and nondiegetic are often interconnected and interdepen-*

dent. Close playing reveals the ways these elements, these spaces are also connected and dependent on the logics, narratives, and histories of the real world. As Constance Steinkuehler (2007) says, MMORPGs are "indeed a constellation of literary practices" (p. 301). For example, close playing allows diegetic features like gun violence in the game and nondiegetic features like the real world Columbine shootings to be articulated and contextualized in ways that complicate notions of violence, gaming, identity, and sociality. As Henry Jenkins (2000) argues, "We should instead look at games as an emerging art form — one that does not simply simulate violence but increasingly offers new ways to understand violence — and talk about how to strike a balance between this form of expression and social responsibility" (p. 120). Close playing allows diegetic features like fantasy race and nondiegetic features like a menu of fantasy faces to select from to be described and critiqued in order to unpack racial or racist logics. Gee says, "Video games have an unmet potential to create complexity by letting people experience the world from different perspectives" (p. 151).

The takeaway here is that close playing is understanding the intersection of form, function, meaning, and action. It is an attention to more than just the content of the game (which is often what students and mainstream game reviews and even Congressional hearings about video game violence privilege), more than just the mechanics, and more than the graphics. Rather, it is an attention to how all of these things are in articulation or antagonism. Knowing how to play a game is not enough. Knowing what the game is about is not enough. And know how the game works, even at the level of code or interface, is not enough. The best close playing (and I think close reading, too) does in fact put into practice a kind of interdisciplinarity that is hard. (Let's face it: the best scholars and the best readers and the best writers summon a range of discourses, skills, and experiences to their aid.)

The students in Tim and my CHID courses or in my ENGL 207: Introduction to Cultural Studies courses on virtual worlds and video games begin the term with enthusiasm and engagement. Their avocational interest in video games is often what leads them to self-select these classes. However, after the first couple of meetings, that interest wanes often as a direct result of their fear or dismay over what they often describe as "taking the fun out of games" (or what I'd like to darkly call "murdering their childhood"). Even the willing students, who want to pursue video game studies as a disciplinary and intellectual choice, often find themselves in a state of ambivalence. Without careful framing, without guided practice, and without a little gentle cajoling, the quarter or semester can turn into a pitched battle between students defending their hobbies and you trying to convert the unwilling.

In fact, here is an occasion where "meeting students where they are" (a popular pedagogical imperative and desire) is fraught with intellectual, political, and personal territory battles. Last year, the first course Tim and I taught together was on the immensely popular 2K title *Bioshock* (2007). We designed the course to address "cyborg morality and posthuman choice" linking the playing of the game to the resurgence of the reading of Ayn Rand's novels, the intensification of neoliberalism, and the theorizing of the posthuman. It became clarionly clear by the second week that we had lost the majority of our students. To quote *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade*, we chose poorly. It wasn't the choice of game, though. It wasn't the choice of readings per se. And it wasn't necessarily the choice of theme. Rather, it was the way we chose to frame the class, to address the students' comfort with video games in general and in terms of scholarly pursuit, and to scaffold how and more importantly why it is important to close play. This failure on our part resulted in the aforementioned pitched battle. The students simply wanted to talk about what happened within the game and how to best play the game. Meanwhile, Tim and I fought to reclaim ground we never really had in the first place. And when we did manage to turn the conversation to things like Randian politics and the notion of choice within the game (*Bioshock*'s climax is all about the player/main character's choice or lack thereof), the conversations spiraled into personal opinion, political defensiveness, frustration and anger over perceived loss of privilege or free will—the very neoliberal responses that we set out to critique became what students deployed as shields and safe havens. (Here the students failed to be open to the possibilities or to be willing to even entertain the possibilities at hand.)

It wasn't a complete disaster, though. We both learned how to adapt the failings of the *Bioshock* class. Our next class, to credit Tim's foresight and thoughtfulness (who by the way has recently blogged about "How NOT to Teach Video Games"), took up the very problem of whether or not games could be persuasive or political as the guiding rubric for the class. Therefore, "Why So Serious?: Video Games as Persuasion, Propaganda, and Politics" was born. This class opened with questioning the power of video games as a rhetorical and political medium as well as games that were overtly about a

"message" or a "stance." In other words, we gave them a much clearer entrance into the kinds of analyses we wanted to develop and discuss. We provided the groundwork in how to play the games and talk about them. All in all, the class went much more smoothly and was more satisfying to all. (That isn't to say there wasn't any resistance, but the resistance was less vitriolic and easier to manage.) The takeaway lesson for us was all about meeting students where they are in terms of their interest and curiosity but to build those stairs, tracks, handholds, or whatever metaphoric guides you choose to get them from interest to interrogating the medium, from curiosity to critical awareness. Alas, there is no single formula for this transformative and multimodal work. And each cohort of students will be differently capable and experienced. But I think that as long as we as scholars and professional close readers can go back and look at our own development, our own process, and our own training (some of it self-taught and self-discovered) that led us to our own work, we can hopefully demonstrate and transmit and transform some of that to and for our students, who are just starting this journey. There are no close reading or close playing "natives." Therefore, it is important that we not only teach video games but teach how to play them with a critical eye and thumb.

This entry was posted in Gaming, Teaching and tagged CHID focus groups, close playing, close reading, pedagogy, teaching video games, Timothy Welsh. Bookmark the permalink.

❮ "Knights in Shining Armor: Role Players Step Outside Reality"

Upcoming Course: CHID 496 F: "Close Playing, or, Bioshock as Practicum" (Winter 2011) ❯

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11 THOUGHTS ON "CLOSE PLAYING, A MEDITATION ON TEACHING (WITH) VIDEO GAMES"

ANDREW FREEMAN

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I can imagine how frustrating it must be to try and teach someone how to "close play". For most gamers, the act of playing a video game is primarily for amusement. They generally do not envelop themselves in a game in an attempt to understand some larger