From Candy Crush to Catan: One Student's Perspective on the Benefits of Gaming in Academia

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In the spring semester of 2015, I, a fresh-faced college sophomore, made the bold decision to take a class called "The Rhetoric of Gaming." Having only played games during my childhood, this choice was perhaps a bit naïve. Admittedly, I was the definition of what some may call a "casual," "plebe," or "newb," even below that. Not only did I think games were solely for entertainment, but I also thought that gaming ultimately had little to no value. I was a hater, actively dismissive of gaming and the surrounding culture. In my mind, gaming was a boy's club in the worst way. When I pictured gamers, I saw horrifying scenes of boys and men hurling violent, sexist insults at one another over Xbox live. Though I think of myself as an open-minded person, everything I knew about gaming was based on harmful stereotypes. Putting all this aside, when you consider that my peak gaming experience occurred when Kim Kardashian: Hollywood was released, it was clear that I had a deficit from the moment I walked into the classroom. I had no idea what to expect and no way to relate to my peers. When they spoke of FPSs and MMOs, I responded with WTFs and IDKs. All things considered, enrolling in the Gaming class was one of the more foolish decisions I made during my academic career.

When I took my seat on that first day of class, I cursed myself for my stupid decision. Gawking in horror at my fellow students, all my suspicions were being confirmed right before

my eyes. Every negative gamer stereotype must have been seated in that classroom. As I stared

at the 30-year-old male in front of me while he chugged his bottle of Mountain Dew like it was

his life force and shoved fistfuls of nacho cheese Doritos into his gaping maw, I knew I had

made a grave mistake. I remember leaning over to my neighbor and declaring, "This classroom

is literally all 9 circles of my personal Hell." Nightmares of socially inept, unkempt, Gamergate

bros danced through my head as I imagined what was to come for the rest of the semester. I

pictured myself in heated exchanges over whether Ubisoft was sexist and shuttered. What had I

gotten myself into? As I weighed the pros and cons of dropping the class, the professor walked

in, and I decided to table the discussion for a later date. However, once the professor explained

what was in store for us that semester, I knew that a later date would never come. All it took was

one class period—Syllabus Day, at that—to convince me that the gamified classroom was an

infinitely unique, innovative, and effective alternative to the traditional classroom. Even if I

couldn't resolve my distaste for gaming, I quickly understood that this experience was one I

would regret missing if I chose to drop the class. So, I didn't.

As the professor detailed the inner workings of our gamified classroom, I was entranced

by this way of designing a classroom experience. Instead of traditional grades, we received XP

(experience points) for assignments. We went on "Quests" and wrote about our experiences,

which involved taking field notes during class game nights. Rather than using our actual names

and likenesses, we each created an avatar with personalized strengths and abilities that were used

to assign us to classes in group projects (think Dungeon & Dragons). Finally, we got to one of

the most alluring aspects of the gamified classroom: the leader board. Each time grades were put

in, my classmates and I would change positions on the board, competing for that coveted first place spot. As an incredibly competitive person, the leader board was the most exciting idea of all to me. Flash-forwarding to May, I saw my name in the number 1 position, filled with the satisfaction of knowing I won the class. Now, rest easy, FERPA—our identities were anonymized by secretly assigning cartoon characters to represent each member of the class. Identities were a minor concern to the students, however. Everyone who was not in the top spot knew it wasn't them, and that was enough. I was fascinated by the implications of designing a classroom in this manner. Here was the perfect way of intrinsically motivating students. After all, who wants to lose a game? Competition aside, the class was also designed to play on the student's strengths, encouraging productivity with better results. The individualized nature of the classroom was even more important because it emphasized collaboration on the final project: designing your own board game.

Truthfully, when our professor told us that we were going to be designing and producing board games, I was apprehensive. This seemed like the sort of project that people spent years working on with experienced professionals, not weeks with a group of rookie students. As someone who had never even fathomed creating a board game, I did not have the slightest idea as to what kind of game I would create. This task was made even harder when our professor informed us that we would be creating *persuasive* games. Our games had to use Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric—or the "practice of using processes persuasively" (Bogost, 3)—to make an argument that uses the gaming process to further assert our claim. Although his idea seems relatively simple now, understanding this concept was the most difficult part of the class

for many students. Why was procedural rhetoric almost exclusively limited to play? Why did he consider some forms of play more procedural than others? Although grossly oversimplifying Bogost's theory, the level of procedurality depends on the level of vividness that the process offers. According to Bogost, games are one of the most vivid experiences one can have, short of lived experience. For those of us who did not play games, this idea was difficult to grapple with. As an English major, I've always thought that written language was king. But some random gamer was here to tell me that his precious video games were somehow better than my words. I could not, would not understand how a video game could be able to teach ideas more effectively than quite literally spelling it out on paper could. Now, I see how irrational this line of thinking was, but I was not having it at the time. I fought hard against his line of thinking for weeks until I had my eventual "come to Jesus" moment where the lightbulb clicked on, and Bogost's argument finally made sense. After the grueling weeks of my professor hammering Bogost into my brain, I was finally prepared to implement my ideas into a game.

Each student was tasked with conceptualizing their own persuasive game and then proposing that idea to the class. After everyone presented, the class voted for our favorites, and the final three moved on to prototyping. While I was sure my game, a Clue-meets-Mafia-meets-Guess Who? 1950s-nuclear-family-themed game about identity politics, would be Hasbro's next big thing, I was bested by the work of genius entitled *Escape from Silverton*. Arguably the most well-conceived game of the entire class, this game put players in a position of a person living in a low-income, high-crime city called Silverton. The object of the game was to escape from Silverton by moving to a neighboring city. To do so, players needed to earn $2,000 by choosing

either the Civilian or Criminal path. The Civilian path, while low risk, involved getting a regular

job and slowly earning income. The Criminal path offered large payouts for doing risky,

nefarious activities. However, after too many negative Criminal activities, a player's Reputation

would drop to zero. Once they reached this point, there was no redemption. Much like actual

Criminals, they were forced to take the Criminal path for the rest of the game and hope it played

out in their favor. The message of this game was simple but powerful: sometimes good people

are forced to do so-called bad things to survive, and stigmatizing people for doing those things

only exacerbates the cycle. Thinking back to Bogost and procedural rhetoric, I believe this game

is proof of gaming's power to enact social change. By asking players to make Civilian or

Criminal choices and forcing them to live with the consequences, the game effectively exposed

players to the realities of life as a person in a low-income, high-crime area. I remember watching

this student give his proposal in class and being captivated by the notion that a board game could

communicate such a significant message in a creative, engaging, and, most importantly,

successful way. As dismayed as I was by not winning the vote, I knew that this student's game

was the one I wanted to work on. The next step was to make it happen.

As luck would have it, when our professor divided us into groups based on the roles he

assigned us earlier in the semester, I was placed in the *Escape from Silverton* group. As most

students will tell you, group projects suck for a variety of reasons. One, maybe two, people

always end up doing the work of six people, everyone receives the same grade even though one

person never came to a meeting or responded to any emails, and someone always does something

wrong at the last minute, forcing someone else to stay up until 4:00 AM to cover their mistakes,

all fueled by junk food, caffeine, and sheer hatred. But not *Escape from Silverton*. As if blessed

by the Gods of academia, our group was perfect. We had a great balance of responsibilities,

everyone got on well enough, and we were all extremely excited about the project. Everyone

already had a job based on their avatar's assigned class, so we were all doing work that we not

only excelled at but also enjoyed doing. Unfortunately, ours was the only group that had

someone from every class, so the other groups struggled with finding a similar balance.

However, this issue did highlight the level of collaboration needed on a project like this, which

was one of the most valuable takeaways of the class. While everyone in our group was well-

suited for their role and able to work independently, we had to come together and find a cohesive

end goal due to the size and nature of the project. Although it came from one person's idea, none

of us had ever been challenged in this way before. There was no way for one person to do a

project of that size in two months, so all six members group members had to come together and

bring their ideas to life. In the other groups where they were not as strong in every area,

collaboration was even more important. For difficult tasks, it took the effort of every member to

adapt and make the project work for them. Flexibility, combined with the right level of

collaboration for each group, was essential to all three projects.

Because the student who proposed *Escape from Silverton* had done such a great job of

conceptualizing the game, we were able to start creating content immediately. However, our

group was still extremely rigorous. Each week, our project manager assigned us cards to write,

and we would meet to sort through the ones we thought were the best. One of the biggest

challenges of our game was trying to find a proper balance between funny and potentially

problematic content. Considering the nature of our game, we wanted the cards to introduce a

note of levity so we could reach a wider audience. But it was easy for certain group members to

buy into negative stereotypes when writing their cards. Every card was reviewed on an

individual basis to make sure the jokes a) did not punch down and b) did not fall flat. We spent

hours trying to make our cards inoffensive but not so much so that they were prudish. Content

creation aside, we also needed to conceptualize and design our packaging graphics, game

components, and rulebook. Our game included 140 cards, 12 dials that were used to keep track

of player's in-game stats, the rulebook, and three dice. We had to figure the size of all our

components and how they would fit into a box to make sure we bought the proper size. We also

spent a great deal of time focusing on the visual rhetoric of the game. From the symbols and

colors—a red gun for criminals, a yellow person-shaped figure for civilians, and a blue star for

heroes—to the bright red, graffiti font on the dismal, grey, brick background, we wanted our

game to evoke our emotions regarding the subject matter. In our minds, by representing the

Civilians as the only humanoid figures of the game, we were speaking to the demonization of

Criminals and the idolization of so-called Heroes.

As the somewhat tedious detail in the previous paragraph displays, making a game is a lot

of work. I had never taken on a project of that scale before, and I am sure most of my group

hadn't either. Not only did simply conceptualizing our game take weeks, but production also

took even more of our time. While the artist of our group was fully entrenched in Adobe

Illustrator, the rest of us wrote cards like we were transcribing messages from God. Any time I

had an idea for a card, I would stop whatever I was doing and make a note on my phone so I

could refer to it later. We not only spent hours each week working on the game individually, but we also met almost every week for multiple hours in and out of class to continue working. Nothing made it into the game unless it was reviewed by the group. Collaboration was essential to creating our project, but we were all doing it in a way we had never done before this class. Although I am still just a student, if I know anything of the working world, it is that you will often find yourself collaborating with multiple people at once. Except for my prior disappointing group projects, I had always relied on myself to accomplish my academic goals. This project helped my classmates and me realize that we can produce great work when we come together with a good idea and a detailed plan. Moreover, creating the game also forced us to step outside of our comfort zones and challenge ourselves in ways we hadn't previously encountered. Our group was made up of three Professional Writing majors, one Web Development major, one Justice Studies major, and one Public Relations major. Until that point, none of us had been tasked with being so highly creative inside of the classroom. Not only we were forced to think of rhetoric in new and often challenging ways—thanks, Ian Bogost—we also had to become masters of organization, time management, storytelling, critical thinking, written communication, product development, advertising—you get the idea. Our group was so successful that other professors told us they wanted to use our game as a teaching tool.

Speaking of using games as a teaching tool, I was so enthralled by the experience of designing a board game that I decided to do it again the following Fall semester...and again the semester after that. The second game I worked on was a zombie apocalypse-themed game called *Code or Die* that taught players the basics of building HTML code with CSS. The most recent

game I helped create, *Scare Solutions*, was a monsters-meets-business-themed game that answered the question, "What do Professional Writers do?" During an internship with the Director of the Professional Writing program at my university, another student and I designed this game to coincide with the revamping of our university's Professional Writing program. In the hopes of using the game to recruit high school English students, we designed the game to not only show the alternatives that students have to typical Literature, Education, or Creative Writing degrees but also to display the variety of careers and opportunities that come with a degree like Professional Writing. We eventually chose to submit it to our university's annual Research Colloquium where we had many professors and prospective teachers express interest in not only our game but using games as teaching methods in general. They were deeply interested in our theory, and, like us, saw the unique value that games can offer learning experiences, whether it involves gamifying your classroom, creating games as class projects, or using games to teach students specific material.

Thanks to these experiences, games have continued to be an enriching part of my academic experience that I plan to utilize in future professional endeavors. Before I experienced firsthand how effective gaming is in and out of the classroom, I never understood the value or potential that games offered to those who play them. Reflecting on that first day of "The Rhetoric of Gaming," I am shocked to see how drastically one's perspective can evolve in a matter of a year. Rather than dread spending a night in the company of my peers, I began to look forward to our class game nights, adding the most interesting ones to my Amazon wish list. I managed to stop fighting Bogost and not just accept but also understand and appreciate his

theory of procedural rhetoric. At the time, I wasn't ready to admit what I had become: a bona fide gamer. Although Kim K and I may be on a break, my passion for gaming has only flourished in the past year, primarily due to the numerous collegiate and academic benefits I've received from it. Newb no more, this hater-turned-gamer is now a staunch believer in the benefits gaming has to offer the world of academia. I am not only a better student because of gaming. I am a more innovative creator and a more valuable team member. Regardless of whether you are a student or an educator, gaming has advantages for all levels of academia. As someone who just a short year ago held a strong bias against games and gaming culture, my radical change of heart is a true testament to the validity of gaming's place in academia.

Works Cited

Bogost, Ian. *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames*. MIT Press, 2007.