Pulling Back the Curtain: Writing History Through Video Games

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Pulling Back the Curtain

Writing History Through Video Games

Shawn Graham

Let us dispense with the idea that there are such things as “digital natives”.¹ The phrase has outlived whatever usefulness it may have had due to magic.

Arthur C. Clarke said, “any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic”.² Unless you can build and program an iPad from scratch, it is magic. Unless you can build the algorithms that populate your browser with content, the web and associated technologies are again: magic. The Wizard of Oz, on the other hand, said, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!” Maybe it’s like the magic that the Wizard of Oz practices. Let’s pull back the curtain. In this essay, I recount a pedagogical experience with 60 undergraduate history majors at Carleton University where students learned to write for the web and learned how the web is written, including how algorithms (sets of rules) create the content and the experiences that we have online.

I am not talking about writing essays. I am talking about making video games. Or more accurately, about learning to write history-through-algorithms.

The students’ tasks explicitly included writing one’s own algorithms to generate particular kinds of emergent engagement with historical materials. Think about a small child who is playing with a Lego playset, and the stories the child tells as she plays: that’s emergent engagement.³

This kind of writing is alien to how we normally teach our students to write for it explicitly demands that the “writer” think about how the “reader” will make the story in the process of “reading.” In 2005, William Urrichio pointed out the ways that video games represented history. He was not overly concerned with the graphical representation of the past (period-correct
clothing and architecture) but rather with the ways that the rule-sets of the games allowed for different understandings of history itself to be represented. He suggested that historians should engage with video games, and the point of intersection was historiography. The rule-sets of games directly correspond with the historiographic traditions, the rule-sets of historical practice, within which historians write. 

In 2007, Ian Bogost coined the phrase, “procedural rhetoric” to express much the same thought. The idea that the processes of computation embodies a kind of rhetoric and representation of how the world works is also a kind of cosmology. One can learn a lot about how game designers view the world by closely reading their code. In the spring of 2013 I set out to explore these ideas with a seminar called HIST 3812 Video Games and Simulations for Historians.

Let us agree that the rules of games represent something of how the game-makers/players view the world’s workings. I put it to the students that what we were engaged upon, in learning to write history-through-algorithms, was akin to a kind of oracle or riddle building, a way of describing the world that the player – the reader – needs to explore. In this way, the reader may construct or build their own understandings not by reading and intellectually understanding arguments, but through experience. Because we are engaged with the human past, it is also a kind of necromancy in that we might summon the spirits of the past forward, recreated and re-substantiated in digital form. These spirits of the past represent our own best ideas about the past, not the past directly, which of course we can never know. We project onto historical actors our best understandings. So too with these digitally-substantiated simulacra: the meanings of the past emerge from our playing with these digital spectres. We are more familiar with these when we encounter them pinned to the pages of a book or essay; but in silico they write themselves through interaction with each other and with the player.

There was a bit of attrition during these first few weeks of the class.

There are a couple of reasons for this. Angela Cox identifies one of these when she writes about her own experiences treating games as texts to be analyzed in a composition class. On Cox’s reading of her experience, one
point of resistance is our colonization of what students perceive as a non-academic space: academics don’t play games. It may be a surprise that this first issue should emerge in a classroom where “video games” was in the title, but:

Postcolonialism may in fact provide the best explanation for some of the most frustrating student behavior I have witnessed in these classes, because if we see students as the marginalized group and the established academics as the center then student resistance to classroom activity and homework becomes a colonial struggle at the margins [...]. [...] videogames are outside the center’s power and must be defended from further colonization. That is, [students] are resisting cultural appropriation.10

Bill Caraher has reflected on similar themes of student resistance to what and how we teach. He situates one location of resistance in student perceptions of the “trivial,” that the learning is not “serious” enough.11 This accords well with my own experience in another class (where we wrote for Wikipedia), where resistance emerged amongst my most historically-minded of students: what we were doing neither looked nor felt like what History was supposed to be about.12 Kapell and Elliot identify a similar theme in the academic study (by historians) of video games and other simulations of the past, within intersections of historiography with ludology and narratology. If the process of history is composed of both selection (of facts) and assembly (of a convincing and sound narrative), then the kind of assembly that a video game allows is both good history and good pedagogy because the player actively constructs (reads) “history as a process” rather than grand narrative. The objection then, such as it is, is that video games allow the “non-professional to do her or his own ‘assembly’ of the past.”13 Historians and students object, and resist, alike.

**Assignment**

The students had one major project to complete over the duration of this course: to design what the ideal game would look/feel/behave like.14 The assignment prompt was:

In small groups (assigned by the instructor), you will produce a 40-50
page game design document for an ideal history game (or meta game; a game about games) that distills what you have learned about telling history through interactive media. This document will also demonstrate in passing what you have learned as a result of this course. You will need to reference the appropriate games, history learning, games and history, design, psychology, cognitive science or other literatures to explain and show how your game/simulation would achieve its desired ends. For the purposes of this course you do not need to produce the actual game. Although, you may wish to create a playable mock-up or 'beta' of what the game might look like. It should demonstrate key concepts or gameplay mechanics, and be about 10 minutes worth of play. If you create a mockup along those lines, your written document can be correspondingly shorter.

Such a big project holds much potential for running off the rails. Numerous checkpoints were established throughout the term to keep the project on track (our term ran for twelve weeks). The idea was that the students could then re-use these checkpoint materials in their final project design document. The first checkpoint was “the pitch”, where they would be constrained to a single short paragraph to describe the game and their intended historical outcome. The next checkpoint asked them, in a single page, to identify the “problem space” and the principle game mechanic for addressing this space. The problem spaces of a game are the challenges that the player must overcome; hence, to think of “history” as replete with problem spaces forces the student to think of how actors in the past were “confined by resources and rules of interactions with others.” This is a crucial benefit of writing history with video games: it forces understanding that the past was contingent, and not pre-ordained. Moreover, video games foreground the act of (re-)creation of the past in the present, focusing on the contingent rather than the grand master narrative.

These two checkpoints were due during the third and fifth weeks of the term. It was not until the seventh week (over halfway) that students produced a document that finally addressed the game structures and the relationship to the “skin” of the game (that is, the difference between what the game is ostensibly “about” and what it actually “does”). The final checkpoint (week nine) described in detail the player’s experience at each stage of the game, what they experience, feel, learn and do. Two weeks later each group had to present their work in progress in lightening timed presentations;
each group had ten minutes and thirty slides (set to auto-timer) to cut to the heart of their process. Writing algorithmically is about writing spare, being lean, and using the most effective amount of code to get the job done. While these students did not write code per se, they wrote academic code in a way that mimicked computer code, in contrast to that normal tendency to fluff, to expand, to meet page requirements.

Again, in keeping with the desire to promote lean and effective coding, the students also had to blog weekly, reacting to not just the readings and the class discussion, but also to what was happening in their groups. “Accuracy” is a recurring theme. In the earliest posts, “accuracy” is conceived in terms of visual fidelity to the props of history such as proper uniforms, correctly rendered architecture, period-appropriate speech (that is, with the “skin” of the game rather than its underlying rhetorics). Roughly halfway through the course there is a pivot. I had the students play “Depression Quest,” an interactive fiction (text adventure). The website provides this description:

Depression Quest is an interactive fiction game where you play as someone living with depression. You are given a series of everyday life events and have to attempt to manage your illness, relationships, job, and possible treatment. This game aims to show other sufferers of depression that they are not alone in their feelings, and to illustrate to people who may not understand the illness the depths of what it can do to people.

Working through how interactive fiction can produce emotional impact wrought a change in the idea of “accuracy” held by the class. By removing the graphics, by confronting them with a story generated by their own choices that focused on the experience of an illness, the earlier lessons of the course began to click with the students. Subsequent discussions in class were richer and nuanced (and the video game fan-boy element receded somewhat). As one student put it during a class discussion, “the strength of video games like this is that they create empathy; they’re more like what we’re used to reading when we read history, but because our interests and choices make a difference, we care more about what’s happening to the characters.”
Outcomes

At the end of the course, there were six group projects submitted. Did students learn to be magicians? Did they see how algorithmic writing could produce knowledge, understanding, and empathy for actors in the past? Did they make the connection between what they were doing and the way information on the web is presented to them? For the most part, yes. One project ultimately missed the point entirely, but another project, “The Medic’s War”, exceeded all my expectations. Its creators wrote,

Our [world war I] game looks to broaden the emotional range of video games and the players. We strive to illuminate the tragedy of war by creating an empathy with a group that has not been explored yet – the field medic. Many games that show history are focused colonizing, on conquering, about playing at war [...] Our game doesn’t rely on domination but rather attempting to show the true nature of war; no matter which side you’re playing on, there will be casualties, soldiers who are following orders, that need aid.21

A screenshot from the game prototype, “The Medic’s War.” It combined role-playing game elements (as in the left panel) with code words that unlocked interactive fiction texts (as in the right panel) to create empathy and an algorithmic experience of the pity of war.

I had worried about these particular students. In one regard, they had bought in to what we were doing in this course too much. Every checkpoint document was vast and complicated. In their zeal to create the perfect game they had adopted a kind of kitchen-sink approach. The moment with Depression Quest was powerful for this particular group because it was also alienating. Angela Cox, in her class teaching games as texts, notes (when
introducing older games and their conventions), “The notion that they had to type commands into the older games was utterly foreign to them; they struggled with it in much the same way that students struggle to read Middle English when we assign them Chaucer.” The zenith of interactive fiction occurred before these students were born; interacting with Depression Quest confronted the students with something that bewildered in its restraint. To drive home the idea of restraint, I had this particular group resubmit each of their checkpoint documents in the style of a tweet (140 characters only). In their resubmissions, they recognized that engaging with algorithmically generated (and read) texts could be used to create in the player the sense of confusion and despair that they identified in the diaries and letters of First World War soldiers and civilians. Thus, by writing not at the level of narrative but in the construction of possible outcomes, these students designed an emergent narrative to evoke the pity of war.

Conclusion

Our last few sessions included a discussion about how the lessons that this course taught translated into other digital media, including Google Scholar, Wikipedia, and even the robots who are starting to write the sporting news. Brittney, a self-described non-gamer, wrote on the course blog:

If games [read, ‘digital media’] allow the player to immerse themselves into the game in a natural manner, the choices and actions in the game become a sort of digital extension of the player’s mind. This way, it is not just the never ending question of the accuracy of the facts and what is included or excluded […] the player is left to their own devices and the more engaged they become, the more they take away from the game. THIS is what I consider good history. A person can engage with the storyline, the events of the past reconstructed in the game, and when they are able to immerse themselves into the game, they absorb the facts and repercussions of the past without having to be consciously aware of all of the minute details. Thus engaging them on a personal level with the past. Learning to play WHILE they are playing to learn.

This is the value of encouraging students to use technology to learn how knowledge is produced, how history is constructed, and how values are
passed on. In this digital era, we serve our students best by teaching them to pull back the curtain and look at what happens behind it.

About the author: Shawn Graham is an assistant professor of digital humanities in the Department of History at Carleton University in Ottawa Canada. He blogs at electricarchaeology.ca, marshals some of his digital life at graeworks.net, and is all over twitter at @electricarchaeo. Currently, he’s working on experiencing place-based history algorithmically via something he calls ‘Historical Friction’, with Stuart Eve.

How to cite:


See an earlier version of this essay with open peer review comments.25

Notes


15. These checkpoints were developed and inspired from materials posted at the Learning Games Network; as of March 31st 2014 the site is under redevelopment at http://www.learninggamesnetwork.org/.


17. McCall, “Navigating the Problem Space,” p 12

18. Kapell and Elliott, Playing with the Past, 14.


24. Brittney, ‘Wait...It’s Not an Actual Sandbox? Or is It?’ #hist3812 March 20, 2013, http://www.3812.graeworks.net/2013/03/20/group-g7-r-brittney-wait-its-not-an-actual-sandbox-or-is-it/
