Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019

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Games, as Wittgenstein warned us, are not easily placed into categories (36). At this point, even cataloging general game mechanics is a fool's errand; genres proliferate as fast as the gatekeepers of the App Store and the Steam platform can green-light them. Yet for all this growth, it is an easy matter to say what games are not. Games are not, in most departments, humanistic scholarship.

This is not to say that there has been no cross-pollination between games and the humanities or that there are not already natural relationships between the two areas. It took some time before even writing about games became acceptable as humanistic scholarship. But in the end, it was not hard for an academy well adjusted to the long shadow of cultural studies to conform itself to these new objects of inquiry. It also was not terribly difficult to develop academic programs in which the creation of video games—one of the more striking examples of the marriage of engineering and art—became the principal research activity: where a billion-dollar industry arises, an academic program will follow: With revenues that exceed those of Hollywood, and a growing and diversifying world market, one might argue that video games are among the most important imaginative human artifacts to develop in the past several decades; it would be extraordinary if the academy were not discussing them and teaching people how to build them. Furthermore, games naturally engage with subjects that lie within the conventional province of humanistic inquiry, including storytelling, architecture, music, and visual art. In spite of all this, building a game in a History or English Department and submitting that as academic work on par with a book remain risky propositions.

Humanistic inquiry is concerned with the study of the human record. In the conventional media by which discoveries concerning this record are communicated (books and articles), the process by which this knowledge was achieved often takes the form of a re-creation of the author’s or authors’ experience (whether that is the experience of reading a novel, excavating an archaeological site, viewing a painting, analyzing archival materials, or any of the dozens of activities one might take with
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Thus the literary critic reads and then attempts to re-create that particular reading experience for someone else. The historian makes his or her way through the twisted paths of the archive and then re-creates that experience in the form of a discursive set of findings and theorizations. Scholarly articles in historical archaeology are often substantially about the process by which the discovery was made. Often, the “techne” of scholarly writing consists primarily in making these experiences seem less fluid and fraught with uncertainty than they actually were—as if the path had always been clear and simple. But that is only a rhetorical flourish. The statement, “I discovered x, was perplexed by it, and was led to y, which in turn led me to z,” would represent an unusual form of scholarly writing, but certainly not a nonscholarly one nor one without precedent.

“Scholarly experience,” however, is a message in search of a medium. Traditionally, the outcome has been a reconstructed experience that has taken a particular, and particularly restrictive, set of forms (e.g., books and articles or their digital surrogates). Establishing games as among these forms merely involves reimagining in more radical terms the outcomes of the already game-like experiences that lead to scholarship. The emphasis, however, needs to be placed on creating meaningful analogs to the experiences that lead toward scholarly outcomes, and not on importing traditional methods from older scholarly forms. Matters such as “citation,” “thesis,” “abstract,” and the generic traditions of scholarly rhetoric need to be viewed not as necessary components to enabling something to be deemed scholarly, but rather as the apparatus of a specific genre and its medium. To talk about video games is to talk about both a new genre and a new medium: one that will require its own, perhaps quite different, scholarly apparatus.

Of course, if we are to talk about games as a new genre and medium for a scholarly research experience, we must remember there is no consistent definition of what constitutes a video game. Nearly all definitions include some aspect of interactivity, but then again, nearly all forms of media are interactive in some way. Television viewers change channels, readers turn pages, and anyone browsing the web interacts with content just by searching and clicking. But beyond acknowledging that games must be interactive, definitions of the medium diverge wildly. Some more traditional views suggest that games should have a goal or pose a challenge, through which certain players can “win.” Others describe a requirement for fun or, more broadly, for play—which might simply constitute a deeper, more personalized kind of interactivity. Many definitions stress the need for rules to accompany a goal, while others focus on the freedom to experiment. Others emphasize the need for a story, although a large percentage of games have none, while still others demand the capacity for choice—which many games nonetheless deny. This debate is not confined only to discussion among scholars but also represents an active discussion among gamers themselves. In fact, disputes over whether the interactive fiction of text games like Depression Quest, which featured sometimes symbolically disabled multiple-choice answers, or so-called walking simulators like Gone Home and Dear
Esther, which eschewed clear goals in favor of environmental storytelling, are proper games continue to saturate game culture and drive online debates.5

For the purposes of this chapter, we define a video game as an interactive digital work designed to impart a particular experience or set of experiences that are dependent on the player’s interactions. Many of these experiences aim to challenge or entertain the player and therefore reflect the more traditional definitions of what constitutes a game outlined earlier. Some games may be more experimental, designed to evoke strong emotions from their players, including fun, as well as fear, mystery, sadness, challenge, sympathy, achievement, or power. Yet other games may be more functional, balancing or even eschewing emotion in favor of the more practical goals of informing, educating, or training their players. Even the most obtuse games still manage the player’s experience in some way, because those designed to be so boring, frustrating, or opaque that they become “unplayable” still elicit an intended response as a result of the player’s engagement (or lack thereof).

But the question remains: Can video games serve not just as scholarship by humanists but also as actual humanities scholarship? In other words, can video games go beyond merely illustrating or synthesizing humanistic content in ways that are credited as scholarship to become vehicles for completely new interpretations in the humanities? Can a humanities scholar use a video game to convey his or her interpretation of the literary, historical, or theoretical significance of a novel or of the broader meaning (or underlying cause) of a specific historical event?

These questions would seem to turn on whether video games, as a medium, offer sufficiently developed features for capturing the scholarly experience, particularly as it relates to articulations of new arguments and interpretations. To be sure, there are many conventions, constraints, and expectations common to the medium of video games that might threaten the conveyance of a potential interpretation. Most of these potential pitfalls involve choices commonly made in the interest of either artistry or usability, and any successful humanities video game would have to acknowledge these choices with a critical awareness. Yet, if we examine these and other potential weaknesses of the video game as a medium for scholarly expression, we find that these weaknesses are not necessarily any more limiting than many common practices associated with written humanities scholarship.

The artistic conventions of games certainly affect players’ reception of them, just as they would a humanistic interpretation conveyed through a game, but humanists already incorporate their own artistic conventions into their written work. Games often seek to manage players’ emotions through dramatic techniques like appeals to humor, sympathy, or disgust; yet so too might a historian begin a chapter with a vivid vignette, or a literary critic with a deeply felt personal anecdote. And just as a game-based drama may anticipate the moral leanings of its players as part of the emotional choices it presents, even quite dispassionately written analyses of injustice or tragedy are intentionally animated by the moral expectations of their audience. Most games also make visual appeals, with carefully crafted art styles or architectural
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environments designed not only to be beautiful or realistic but also to manage the mood, tone, and ultimately the meaning of the experience of gameplay. In general, humanities scholarship relies less on visuals, but even the most emphatically textual works may make use of simple charts, diagrams, maps, or illustrations, each with aesthetic choices that can affect the ultimate interpretation. And what of the expectation that a game be “fun” or, at the least, “entertaining” or “compelling”? Certainly a compelling game will attract more players, just as a clearly and artfully written monograph will (likely) attract more readers. But even the games community has shown its willingness to go beyond mainstream demands for entertainment by creating art games and even so-called anti-games that find their meaning in ugliness, impediment, or frustration. These works succeed in the same way as do humanities texts that are prized for their insights despite jargon-laden or discipline-specific prose. Art and “anti-games” also overlap somewhat with the increasingly broad category of “serious games,” which can encompass everything from games that deal with pressing social issues to those that may reject narrative or ludic concerns altogether for purposes like military and medical training, journalistic reporting, and therapy.

By necessity, games must also simplify the situations they depict and the interactions they facilitate, but so too does good humanities scholarship. Both media must condense time, for example; a historian may reduce an entire decade to a single sentence, while a game may compress the same to a click. Video games and written scholarship also both generalize about and construct their own spaces, as when a researcher draws a map or discusses a region, or when a game designer sets the boundaries of levels. The two media also, similarly, simplify processes; a history may distill hundreds of bureaucratic interactions into an analysis of a single leader, just as a game might represent an incredibly complex interaction like the powering up of a fighter jet as the press of a single button. Most importantly, nearly all scholarship employs some form of synthesis, condensing the prior literature, related artifacts, and the author’s own observations into sentences and paragraphs. The reductions of scale, choice, or interactive possibilities required for a game’s design to be manageable are the result of a similar synthetic process. In short, humanities scholarship takes research and repackages it into an argument. A scholarly game might take the same material and similarly craft a carefully researched interactive experience.

Finally, there are the structural demands of making a game, which, like their written analogs, shape and limit the potential of any argument. Written scholarship has its own formal constraints, such as chapters, figures, quotes, and citations, just as a game has levels, menus, zones, and segments. Humanities scholarship is shaped into the time-honored formats of the essay, the journal, the monograph, and the edited collection, just as video games have their own set of platforms: PC, console, mobile, and now VR. Writing within a specific discipline might also involve theoretical or methodological considerations that limit how a research question might be approached or an interpretation expressed. A historian researching the causes
of a war might find herself investigating everything from world ecology and macroeconomics to the rhetoric or public personality of a single individual, but her methodology must be distilled into a coherent approach or a set of approaches in the resulting scholarship. In the same way, genre will also affect the scope of any scholarly game. But even game mechanics as different as the left-right-down of Tetris or the advanced button combinations of Tomb Raider can be critically assessed in their own context. An argument-as-game might be similarly assessed in the context of its generic constraints, allowing for an awareness of the effects of those constraints on the interpretation that is presented. Regardless of the aspects of the video game medium that might cloud a scholarly argument, there are other aspects that might provide for a fuller realization of a scholarly experience.

By the nature of their interactivity, for example, games have a superior capacity to handle multiple options and outcomes. This potential for variety could lend itself to analyses that do not force scholars to advance a single theory, but instead would allow players to explore multiple interpretations crafted by the game's designer. Explorable environments in which players follow their own curiosity drive complex open-world games like Skyrim and the Grand Theft Auto series, and a scholarly game could similarly give players the ability to choose their own routes through a reconstructed historical space or through an art exhibit in a virtual gallery. Such exploration would depend on the player's own decisions, and player choice is another area where games have provided compelling examples of intentionally designed user agency. These include the adaptive strategies enacted in classic turn-based wargames and modern multiplayer online battle arena games, as well as the life-or-death moral choices in TellTale's Walking Dead series. Of course, other forms of scholarship allow for a degree of choice—for instance, the search bar on a digital archive—but games can also respond to and manage player choices as they are made, as when Mario Kart increases an opponent's ability in response to a player's aptitude or when the narrator in the Stanley Parable playfully responds when his directions are disobeyed.

Games are well suited for expressing and responding to the sort of complex processes that humanities scholars often attempt to articulate. Many types of games are defined by formal or informal rules, and these rules can be adapted to reflect similarly structured humanistic arguments or theories. Computer games provide many methods of simulation; for example, Civilization's world systems, the Sims' social interactions, and the economic markets of Eve Online. Scholars could make use of simulations not only by offering sets of rules or models as components of an argument in which players could evaluate its impact on the simulation's outcomes but also by arranging more open spaces in which users could experiment in an environment bounded by the scholar's theory or design. Games include great examples of these experimental spaces; take the success of indie games like Kerbal Space Program or Besieged, which give players a toolkit and a problem and then challenge them to complete a goal, resulting in solutions that the designers themselves would
never have conceived. Famously, *Minecraft*'s intended structuring mechanic of the quest has been dramatically overshadowed by players who prefer to use the game's building environment as a sort of virtual Lego kit. Interactive simulations might also promote novel forms of scholarly discussion, as scholar-players or reviewers could explore the merits of a proposed model, both designing scenarios that might disprove the game's overarching theory and critiquing the simulation itself if its results are too perfect. Scholarly games might even include traditional game challenges for their players—not simply to entertain but also to embody real-world frustrations and satisfactions. For instance, players tasked with building a pyramid using only Bronze Age tools might form a new appreciation for ancient ingenuity, and accounts of these experiences might themselves constitute a set of scholarly interpretations that could then drive further discussion.

Perhaps most importantly, games could provide a vehicle for modeling humanistic theories in a way that more closely resembles the diverse variety of subjective human experiences. One of the greatest advantages of the video game medium is its ability to place a player in the role of a character. Role-playing games from the pixelated *Dragon Warrior* to the sprawling *Fallout* series have shown the potential for engineering unique character profiles, each of whom experiences the same virtual world quite differently. This simulated subjectivity has often been used to give players powers and abilities beyond their daily lives, but these avatars could just as easily be tailored to show limitations. Such characters might be made to be aware of their race, class, rank, sexual orientation, or other personal or group identities, for example, and experience the consequences of those identities as they traverse the game. Indeed, placing players in specific roles to generate empathy has driven the success of both high-budget games from large studios and many “serious” or educational titles. In the *Walking Dead* series, for instance, many players remarked on how protective they felt when playing the character of Lee, an adult in charge of looking after grade-school-aged Clementine during a zombie outbreak, while others reported increased feelings of vulnerability when the sequel gave them the chance to play as the young girl. Designers can use empathy to implicate the audience in coercive situations, as in *Papers Please*, when players taking on the role of a checkpoint clerk in a fictional Soviet-bloc–style country are forced to choose between aiding the plight of incoming refugees and endangering the paycheck on which their own family depends. Where before scholars might use evocative details to summon their readers’ empathy for historical actors, scholarly games could allow players to embody those actors’ roles and gain empathy for them through active participation.

Scholarly games might also be able to enhance humanities scholarship by more fully representing the wider context of a particular object of study. Teachers will often remind literature students how different *Macbeth* would have felt watching it from the pit at the Globe from how it would read on a modern page or how the Elgin Marbles would have appeared from the roof of the Parthenon in the classical Acropolis. By conveying a more true sense of space, of the passage of time, and of
the use of sound, color, texture, and interaction, games can add vibrant and dynamic context to interpretations that would be difficult to express on the page. When combined with the previously discussed possibilities for embodying a subjective character or viewpoint, games have the capability to present much more complete phenomenological experiences as scholarly arguments. In addition to tangible elements like the weather, the time of day, and the time of year, as well as the particular acoustics, vantage points, access, and limitations of a space, scholarly games could attempt to articulate the experiential knowledge that colors subjective meaning. If a reader is unlikely to understand the drudgery of a historical trade like blacksmithing from a description alone, a game can provide a player with a virtual hammer to pound for dozens of tries until simulated fatigue sets in. If a modern visitor might not understand the experience of dread that an idyllic Civil War cemetery might evoke in a war veteran, then a game can give them a more visceral sense of battlefield horror—perhaps even visited on a group of virtual family members.

While the potential for the sort of scholarly games described earlier has yet to be realized in humanities departments, there are examples of recent games released both by the industry and the academy that might serve as models for future efforts. Never Alone, a side-scrolling action game, is the result of an extensively documented collaboration between E-Line Media and the Iñupiat people of Alaska; it uses traditional platforming gameplay to teach players about both tribal folklore and community values. Another game, 1979 Revolution, adopts Telltale-style dramatic choices to pull players between different factions during a re-creation of the Iranian revolution. This game also incorporates surviving documents, photographs, and the oral family history of its designer Navid Khonsari. But perhaps the best early example of a scholarly humanities game is Walden: A Game, a project led by game design professor Tracy Fullerton at the School of Cinematic Arts at the University of Southern California. Walden draws on the mechanics of recent survival games, but instead of forcing players to manage scant resources to stay alive, it challenges them to follow in the path of Henry David Thoreau's famous book, seeking enlightenment and peace by exploring and experiencing the seasons in a faithful re-creation of Walden Pond. Exhaustively researched over many years, the player's experience as curated by Walden is both a literary interpretation of the original text and a historical analysis, employing archival historical evidence to inform its original script and reconstructed environments. Players may very well come to a deeper experiential and emotional understanding of Thoreau, transcendentalism, and nineteenth-century America by playing Walden, but the game's effectiveness and meaning can be discussed and critiqued in light of the original book and other historical evidence, just like a traditional form of humanities scholarship.9

Of course, undertaking the project of creating scholarly games in the humanities cannot proceed without due attention and acknowledgment to other, long-established communities and discourses around games. This includes not only game studies but also the many game design communities that already exist. For while
creating games along the lines we suggest involves a recalibration of what “counts” as humanities scholarship, the art and craft of building games—and doing so critically—have preceded our call by decades. That members of these communities have not always felt welcome at DH conferences and in our journals is not only to our shame but also to our detriment. “Scholarly game” is a useful subcategory only insofar as it provokes an internal discussion about the particular needs of humanities scholars and students; no one in the digital humanities is served by pretending that a new subcategory licenses ignorance or avoidance of fellow travelers and natural allies.

In the end, the greatest obstacle that video games face as forms of scholarly endeavor is merely a subset of the obstacles they face more generally. Like other genres—including, importantly, novels and films—they began more as curiosities than as artistic media. In the last couple of decades, however, it has become increasingly clear that “art game” will one day be as natural a term and one as widely used as “art novel” or “art film.” “Scholarly game” may take a bit longer, but the process can begin at once. Recalibrating the expectations of promotion and tenure committees is often a matter of surprising them with quality work—work that instructs as much as it delights.

NOTES

1. Some major works that emerged from the field of game studies include Wolf and Perron, The Video Game Theory Reader; Juul, Half-Real: Wardrip-Fruin, First Person; Gee, What Video Games Have to Teach Us; Bogost, Unit Operations; Marya, An Introduction to Game Studies; Bogost, Persuasive Games; McGonigal, Reality Is Broken; Bogost, How to Do Things with Videogames; Taylor and Whalen, Playing the Past; and Flanagan, Critical Play.

3. By which we mean digital documents that do not depart in any substantial way from their physical counterparts. Scholarly websites in digital humanities present an interesting case in the context of this discussion, since they are very often focused precisely on offering the reader/viewer the opportunity to have a “scholarly experience.” Still, this is always a matter of emphasis and degree. In all cases, the outcome of one person’s scholarly experience becomes the occasion for another’s.


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