
Playful Instruments: Reimagining Games as Tools for Research and Scholarly Communication

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In academic contexts, digital games are often studied as texts or are used as pedagogical tools to teach basic concepts in early education situations. Less usefully, their systems and economies are often co-opted and decontextualized in short-sighted attempts to “gamify” various aspects of learning or training. It’s no wonder that digital games often appear as a marginal endeavor in Digital Humanities practices, despite their relative compatibility with the broad scope of DH methods and perspectives. However, given that games are highly controlled, conditional, choice-and-consequence-based, problem-solving environments in which players are expected to interact with simulated settings and elements after agreeing to take on particular roles and subject positions, there are promising potential uses of these experiences in academic contexts that have not been fully considered.

One of the unique ways that DH provocations and practices have managed to create a critical lucidity is through making, through the construction of prototypes and through discussions regarding alternative models of perception, narrativity, organization and understanding, enabled through the computer’s multi-media frame. DH work often defamiliarizes and repoliticizes the forms and functions of communication and scholarly work, and continues to challenge socially constructed and sustained institutional habits by asking “What is the relationship between making, thinking, using and critique?” “Thinking through” tools, prototypes, interfaces and platforms and through the narratives that such processes construct, DH-inspired experiments are slowly, but noticeably and provocatively expanding opportunities for scholarly research and communication methods and means. Such changes are the product of an imaginative

resistance to traditional limitations and habitual practices in our institutions.

Motivated by the imperative to explore alternative modes and methods of scholarly research and communication, and guided by the values of open social scholarship practices, this paper reconsiders games not as things to study, but as instruments to study with. Given that games can function as simulations, models, arguments and creative collaboratories, game-based inquiry can be used as a potential method of humanities research and communication. While these ideas have been explored in a preliminary way in relation to a few different academic disciplines (Donchin, 1995; Boot, 2015; Mitgutsch and Weise, 2011; Westecott, 2011) this paper will make the case for a humanities-calibrated consideration of the pragmatics and potentials of game-based research, games as instances of critical making, critical intervention and scholarly communication, and more complex forms of game-based learning than those currently practiced.

This paper is not about shifting the focus of existing game paradigms and practices to more productive and instructional/educational ends (as is often done in “serious game” or “edutainment” design). It is an attempt to challenge textually-dependent scholarship with game-based processes while simultaneously challenging conventional game features and functions with scholarly creativity and textual affordances. In other words, I am concerned with renewing the process of scholarly inquiry in the humanities via game creation and experience, akin to the richness of what Joanna Drucker describes as “diagrammatic process.” I have also been inspired by Geoffrey Rockwell’s attempt to avoid the term “serious games” while also promoting the idea that developing and playing through games are viable ways of modeling and reflecting on humanities based research activities.

Several examples will be discussed, including the use of the open-source Twine program in my undergraduate and graduate classes as a simple and accessible game-design engine. Twine can be used to construct environments which ask critical, provocative questions, or which attempt to rhetorically persuade players through interactive experience and interpellative role-playing. Anna Anthropy’s *Queers in Love at the End of the World*, Porpentine’s *Those We Love Alive*, Mattie Brice’s *Blink*, Kitty Horrorshow’s *Daymare #1: Ritual*, Pippin Barr’s *Burnt Matches*, and Zoe Quinn’s *Depression Quest*, are examples of Twine being used as an innovative and disruptive game engine. In addition, Merrit Kopas’

book, *Videogames for Humans*, thoroughly explores and justifies the diversity of game-based experiments in Twine: “Authors are doing things with Twine that aren’t possible with traditional text. And at the same time, they’re using interactive media to tell stories that mainstream videogames couldn’t dream of telling” (Kopas, 2015: 11). My students have used Twine to engage their peers in alternatives to essay communication, and working together to design such experiences involves them in a collaborative form of critical making. Composing a networked narrative in Twine is akin to constellating and curating not only ideas, but multiple pathways through such ideas. This critical mapping process is as important as the selective routing process experienced by players, who trace particular storylines through the environment.

The usefulness of such methods can be demonstrated through an assignment submitted by Rebecca Wilson, one of my graduate students, who used the creative process of designing a Twine-based experience to achieve the following research goals:

1. To better comprehend the relationship between William Blake’s creative process, his biographical context and his prophetic works,
2. To model and critique his complexity through an emulation of Blake’s own disregard for temporal and spatial consistency and his transitional unpredictability, and
3. To explore the Twine engine as a site of utopian hope, utopian method and heterotopic tensions (thus responding to and engaging with theoretical ideas advanced by Michel Foucault (1984) and Ruth Levitas 2013)).

Addressing these questions through the methodology of building the gamespace and producing a written reflection on the process is different from the resulting game experience in which players role-play as William Blake, interactively negotiating and determining causal links between everyday experiences, inspirational visions and creative invention. However, both opportunities demonstrate the variety of ways in which games, game engines, and game platforms can be used as instruments for research, scholarly communication and pedagogy. As well, given that Twine’s output is an HTML file that can be served online and accessed through a web browser on multiple devices, Wilson’s [work](#) is now accessible to a

much broader audience than an academic paper on the same topic.

Another example of the ways that games can be used as research tools is an in-progress project that is looking to generate feminist game prototypes to facilitate new models, diverse approaches and different narratives to expose war’s patriarchal morphology, to provoke a rethinking of militarised masculinity in the real world and the persistence of hyper-masculinity in idealistic representations of war. These games, designed with alternative value sets to distinguish them from traditionally masculine power fantasies are meant to challenge and realign the values that players become reflexively used to perceiving and employing within mediated scenarios of militarisation and armed conflict. The adoption of feminist value-based design challenges habitual idealisations of war, violence and hyper-masculinity in video game environments through feminist perspectives. Multiple and contradictory feminist war game prototypes can be used to disrupt habits of institutional/personal perception and practice and provocatively/performatively engage players with complex issues of violence, gender and media culture. Incorporating feminist values into a game’s design creates an intervention that promotes critical lucidity for players.

Identifying the need to confront and challenge traditional habits of head, hand, heart and media representation when it comes to game-based perceptions of war (which can reflect and configure attitudes towards war in general) is not unique to this talk. Mary Flanagan, in “Practicing a New Wargame” discusses the perceptual limitations reproduced by conventional wargames and calls for alternative ways of imagining conflict resolution:

“We must look to transcend old conflict models, or we risk perpetuating the damaging myth that there are limited ways of resolving conflicts.... It is vital that game scholars, makers and players see these familiar models on a continuum of change, so new play forms that model new solutions to our problems can be invented. Our games are constantly evolving, and this means we all have an opportunity, even a responsibility, to evolve with them and push ourselves to model the world we wish to create.” (2016: 706)

Flanagan’s call is an important acknowledgement of game design and gamespace as an opportunity to imagine new models. An effort to reimagine, pluralize

and critically engage with the ways that we realize and idealize the long history of armed conflict via a critique of naturalized perceptual habits and assumptions directly speaks to the broader need to expose, augment and erode habitual ways of seeing, being, doing and narrating in the humanities.

These initial examples justify the use of games as research and scholarly communication methods, as more than just new media texts to interpret, and aligns them with current DH efforts to use computer technology as interventions to challenge, critique and re-humanize systems, ideologies, and habitual narrativities, to pluralize perspectives, confront complexity and facilitate multiple models of perception and practice. The computer is a flexible tool can be used in diverse ways to broaden our understanding of human culture and to generate inclusive, inhabitable and thought-provoking stories. By foregrounding the values of open social scholarship and engaging with broader publics via mechanical extensions of perception and action, these unconventional approaches work in connective, integrative and expansive ways to avoid modelling humanities scholarship on more conventional game mechanisms and goals that unproductively foreground acquisition, exploration and competition.

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