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RETHINKING GAMING & REPRESENTATION WITHIN DIGITAL PEDAGOGY:
AN INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

by

ANTHONY WHEELER

A master's capstone project submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2020



2020

Anthony Wheeler

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Rethinking Gaming & Representation Within Digital Pedagogy:

An Instructor's Guide

by

Anthony Wheeler

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Digital Humanities in the satisfaction of the capstone requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

Rethinking Gaming & Representation Within Digital Pedagogy:

An Instructor's Guide

by

Anthony Wheeler

Advisor: Maura Smale

This work fully analyzes the creation process and implementation of a deeply-structured social commentary in the form of a digital interactive-fiction, created in the open software known as [Twine](#). My co-developer, Raven Gomez, and I created a [game](#) that explores the challenges of navigating spaces within higher education as someone who identifies as something considered to be “other” by the standards of the common Western curriculum. Once the infrastructure of the product itself is outlined, this work follows students in an English Composition I course throughout their experiences creating digital interactive-fiction games based on pivotal moments in their lives that shaped an aspect of their current identities. The unit in which this digital project is implemented is supported by themes of identity, social issues, and our relationships with technology not only as scholars but as a society as well. This project was created with the goal of integrating game studies under the wider tent of digital humanities into undergraduate-level courses, creating a case for using other technological mediums as an alternative form of scholarly communication.

Keywords: game, creation, writing, identity, reading, technology, pedagogy

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This work is dedicated to all of the students who have ever felt like their experience wasn't valid within the classroom. Know that you are not nothing, you are everything.

I'd like to take a moment to acknowledge the incredible community at the Graduate Center and the City University of New York that has given me a platform to grow as both a human and a scholar. Thank you to my peers in both the M.A. program in Digital Humanities as well as the Interactive Technology and Pedagogy program for the constant support and inspiration throughout the past couple of years. Also, extreme thanks to all of my students between LaGuardia Community College and the New York City College of Technology who are the driving force behind this work. And of course, thank you to my friends and family for cheering me on from a distance as I took on the challenge of moving to New York City to pursue this field, even when some of you don't quite understand what it is (sometimes, neither do we).

More specifically, I'd like to thank Dr. Matthew K. Gold for serving as an incredibly strong mentor figure to me, and for giving me so many opportunities to learn and grow as a scholar of digital humanities/digital pedagogy. Thank you to Dr. Maura Smale for being perhaps one of the best faculty advisors a graduate student could ask for, always providing support in particularly difficult times. Thank you to Dr. Carlos Hernandez, who has gone above and beyond to support this work since it was conceived in my first semester of graduate school. Lastly, a special thank you is in order to Raven Gomez, my collaborator on the creation of the game that

this research is rooted in, as well as one of my closest friends. I look forward to seeing the same passion we put into this game reflected in future contributions to the fields of game studies and digital humanities.

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Figure 1: Twine narrative tree of *How Have Your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?* (Wheeler and Gomez 2018).

DIGITAL MANIFEST

1. Capstone Whitepaper (PDF)
2. Capstone Instructor's Guide (PDF)
3. Digital Game (*How Have Your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?*): <https://awheeler.itch.io/hhyesyp>

NOTE ON TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

Our game was created using *Twine* (<https://twinery.org/>), a free open-source software that is used to create interactive texts (similar to a hypertext format). *Twine* is a registered trademark of the [Interactive Fiction Technology Foundation](#), which is dedicated to the preservation of interactive fiction. You do not need to know any coding languages to create a simple story with *Twine*, but you can incorporate variables, conditional logic, images, Python, HTML/CSS, and JavaScript when you are able to. *Twine* can be used within your browser for short term use, but it is recommended that you download the desktop version to your computer in order to avoid certain complications (unsaved work, faulty downloads, etc.). However, if you choose not to download it, it is recommended that you use it in Google Chrome or Safari. The games created in *Twine* are saved as HTML files and are run using most browsers, however, I have found that Firefox does not always correctly download/read Twine-HTML files correctly.

Our game is currently hosted on [Itch.io](#). Itch.io is an open marketplace for independent digital creators with a focus on independent video games. Although it has the option for digital creators to charge for their work, it also functions as a free and reliable hosting site for creators who want their work to remain open to the public. The game I worked on can be accessed by anyone simply by clicking a link. Through using Itch.io, it also gives future students, in the classes that incorporate this game into their coursework, the option to preserve the work that they are proud of by the end of the digital project.

Rethinking Gaming & Representation Within Digital Pedagogy:

An Instructor's Guide

This work attempts to challenge the Digital Humanities & Higher Education to further the importance of expanded representation of perspectives/marginalized voices outside of the traditional westernized canon of scholarly essay writing. Excluding race and intersections of gender, culture, ableism, disability and sexuality from public discussions through erasure and acceptance of larger discourses of colorblindness contribute to problematic understandings of video games as a cultural medium, and their significance in contemporary social, political, economic and cultural organization. The idea of basing a game off cultural experiences aims to help students develop a deeper understanding of not only their own identity experience but as well as their peers' differences in identities, helping to foster a safer and more productive classroom space. I will be emphasizing the gaming content and the related source material and referencing Digital Humanities pedagogical practices that can be theorized into game-building strategies in order to structure equality and dismantle power dynamics in traditional classroom settings.

Through using [Twine](#), an open-source platform that is web-based, my co-developer, Raven Gomez, and I have created a playable game that addresses all of these goals. Our idea was that by utilizing interactive mediums through gaming in the classroom we can expose students to diverse experiences in terms of race, disability, gender, culture, and sexuality. This will also lead to the potential for students to align themselves with multicultural literature, and increase their learning outcome in terms of diverse literacy skills. In successfully scaffolding game-based learning into undergraduate-level classrooms, I believe that this can open up the possibility of

furthering undergraduate participation in digital humanities projects as well as create a need for more digital-oriented workshops for students to expand their knowledge and use alternative modes of scholarly communication.

How Have Your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?

The game project that Gomez and I created focuses primarily on the power of identity and aims to provide a perspective of what is possible in using games to expand the pedagogical scope of interactive mediums as a tool for learning and re-creating the standards of knowledge production in higher education. The game is currently known as [*How Have your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?*](#) and was created through the previously mentioned software, *Twine*. From an instructor perspective, our game was made to explore various perspectives and themes that can spark inquiry in imagining how games can be a tool for individualized expression as well as teaching digital humanities practices to undergraduate students. Drawing from the Digital Humanities pedagogical toolkit, I will be referencing practices that can be theorized into game-building strategies towards scaffolding of experiential knowledge production and structuring equality in the classroom. Our aim is to use interactive technology as a method to give voice to those often misinterpreted or silenced within the traditional Western literary canon.

Creating our Game: Methodologies

Despite the game-making process being inherently collaborative, *Twine* as a platform is not suited for an interactively collaborative interface. Meaning, it was virtually impossible to work on the game without sharing the same computer. As co-developers, this meant we had to block out time to meet up if we wanted to build the game out together. This time consisted of extensively writing on whiteboards as we strung our concepts together slowly in order to

establish a coherent experience for the student/player. Ideally, this sort of project would be conducted in-part within a classroom setting, thus fostering a better collaborative environment. However, it was disappointing for a free browse-based software to have such a simple yet difficult constraint to work with. Considering the inexpensive and minimal STEM-based knowledge and technology required to use it, *Twine* became the most accessible option based on our own skill level and intended application towards lower-level college students.

As a narrative tool, *Twine* has the potential to be utilized in the introductory-level writing process. Community colleges are the foundation of public higher education, embodying the largest national body of marginalized students from varying intersecting spectrums of race, gender, nationality, etc. As we are proud alumni of Dutchess Community College and LaGuardia Community College, it would be untrue to our mission if we did not acknowledge our deep value in prioritizing student-centered experiences from students at the junior college level, while also tailoring it to fit those in two-year as well as four-year programs at senior colleges. In terms of the digital humanities, it is important when exposing students to digital tools and knowledge production to start with a small-scale assignment. When creating an opportunity for learning alternative methods of written expression, we can utilize digital humanities practices to encourage students to become more producers rather than consumers in a growing digital world. As an interactive digital medium, video games like *Twine* have the potential to integrate into settings of English Composition (or remediation) and/or New Student Seminar settings in which the core expectations of students' performance can be challenged to better meet the needs of students.

In thinking of the game design which would inform the structure of the game, we wanted to be acutely conscious of the experiences we would be putting the player through by iterating sequences of dialogue that would help guide the player into understanding some of the broader themes and intentions we wanted to cover throughout the game. *How Have your Experiences Shaped your Paper?* portrays a reflective writing exercise through the perspective of a student, Alex Carter, as she attempts her first rough drafts which would be revealed depending on the player's choice of listed writing prompts. We crafted Alex's character with the idea that she would remain relatively ambiguous in terms of gender. There are hints throughout the narrative that suggest she is female-identifying (she/her), but depending on the player, they may not read it that way. The ambiguity continues throughout several of the potential paths taken throughout the game. Alex is biracial, so she struggles with many issues surrounding her own race and cultures. We wanted to ensure that each essay prompt was reflective of each of these more painful aspects of Alex's identity (gender, sexuality, race, health/disability).

No matter which path is taken, you find that there exists a frustration in terms of Alex's identity. However, no matter what you choose to have Alex write about, Professor Michael Charleston will always reply with pushback against Alex's intense interpretation of the prompts. Charleston's responses are reflective of the impossible task of isolating various "intersecting" aspects of Alex's identity into a singular aspect within each prompt. Furthermore within each prompt, for example, "gender," the player is posed with making a choice within two narrative "drafts" of an intended memory she will choose to write about. Each narrative choice is a parallel story that requires the player to painfully pick apart at Alex's lived experience in a way that can feel more invasive than introspective. Our *Twine* narrative tree (see *Figure 1* below) branches out

into a sequence of about 5 or so text boxes per prompt, which is split within two narrative arch options with the final sequence resulting in the “feedback” response by Professor Charleston.

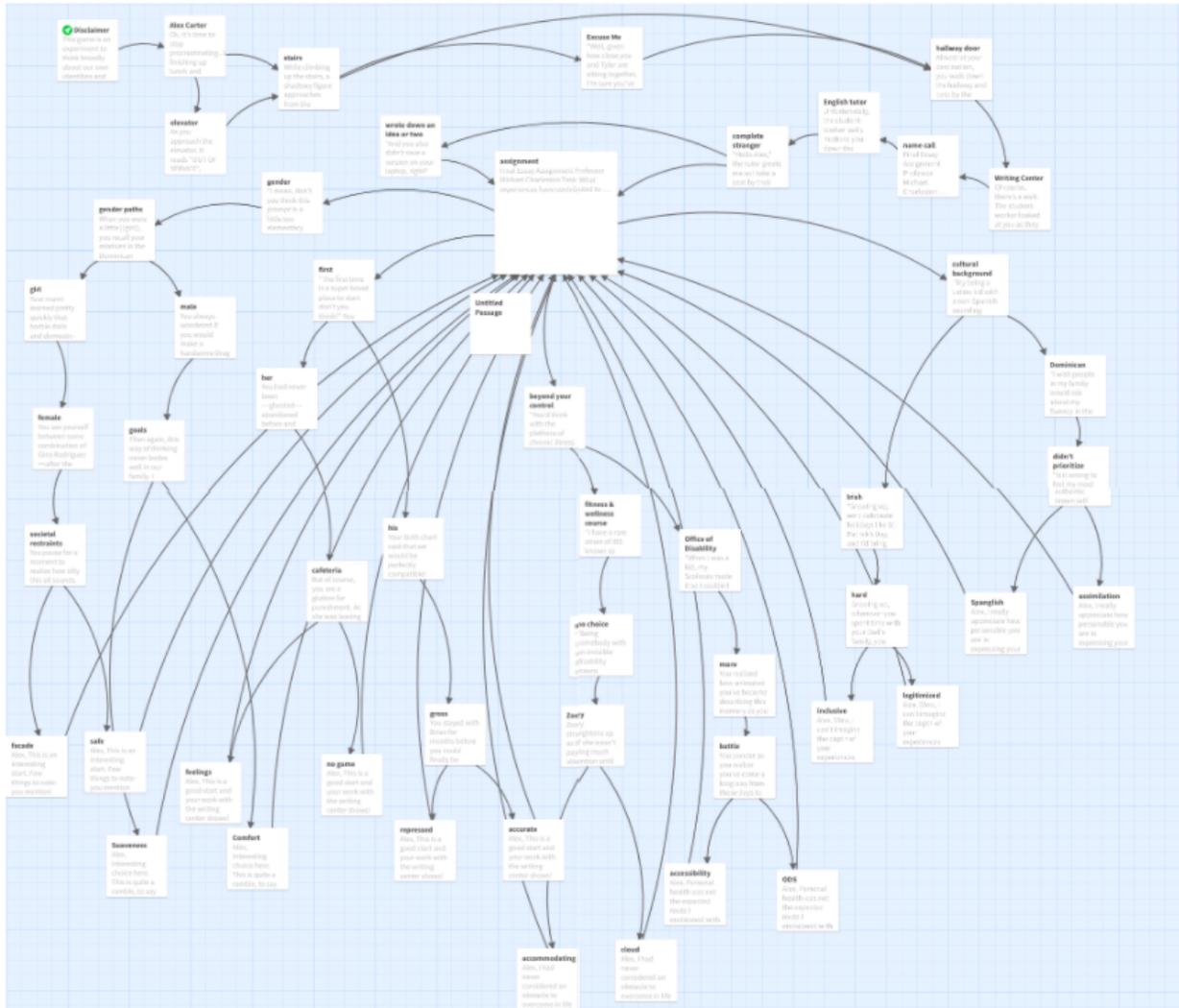


Figure 1. Twine narrative tree of *How Have Your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?* (Wheeler and Gomez 2018).

In constructing this game from a digital pedagogical perspective, we are drawing information from scholars surrounding these topics, specifically in terms of educational facilities. Often in higher education settings, we see that students are forced to acclimate to a cultural setting that does not consider their individualized identity in spite of an institution marketed heavily on diversity. Inspired by Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, the conception

of our game revolved heavily around the notions of identity politics and the myth of what Crenshaw describes as the danger in treating experiences of women of color as isolated based on only one aspect of their identity. We believe that by utilizing gaming in the classroom we can expose students to diverse experiences in terms of race, disability, gender, and sexuality. The heart of Crenshaw's theory of utilizing intersectionality as, "...a way to articulate the interaction of racism and patriarchy," is doing the work of combating the discourse often pervading spaces of higher education which is often perpetuating and "permitting silence around these issues" of race and gender (Crenshaw 1991). With this aspect of intersectionality in mind, our aim is to think of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality as a game mechanic which set much of the foundation of the game narrative.

In reference to *No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games that Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt* by Bonnie "Bo" Ruberg, we want to address the concept of gameplay. She discusses how "no-fun" can be a tool for addressing uncomfortable topics that need to be talked about. We are using a game as a platform to widen the perspective of students using emotional experiences linked to the said game in order to address specific prejudices. The methodologies behind these are seen through Alex's deep internal engagement with her identity while reflecting on the assignment as a whole. These experiences are indeed uncomfortable, and especially uncomfortable to individuals who experience these hardships rooted in identity regularly. Higher education is generally a place where kids become the adults that they want to be, and identity plays a crucial role in their learning process. Additionally, as both Ruberg and Crenshaw highlight, there is a danger in attempting to represent an "all-encompassing" experience that not only takes away from the notion of "play" but further problematizes the

expectations of any expressive medium as the sole method towards understanding others lived experiences. Through Alex's gameplay, this notion is not only interrogated but realized as the player is required to play the game multiple times in order to grasp a broader understanding of her life and personality.

In referring to the importance of identity among students, *Structuring Equality: A Handbook for Student-Centered Learning and Teaching Practices*, a collection published by the organization HASTAC, has an article written by Cathy Davidson of The Graduate Center (CUNY) titled "How and Why to Structure a Classroom for Student-Centered Learning and Equality." Davidson (2017) dives into how we can restructure English courses (and the classroom in general) to create a more equitable space in terms of helping students foster their identities. Helping students develop a deeper understanding of not only their own identity experience but as well as their peers' different identities, help to foster a safer and more productive classroom space.

Also, research conducted and published by Beth A. Ferri of Syracuse University and David J. Connor of Columbia's Teachers College in their journal article titled *Tools of Exclusion: Race, Disability, and (Re)segregated Education* influenced the conceptual thinking behind Alex's health and issues with her disabilities. There exist many institutional issues surrounding the interconnectedness of segregation, special education, and race. We hope that this branch of the narrative will open up conversations surrounding health services and accessibility within higher education and on college campuses.

Furthermore, we hope that this work has the potential to increase student exposure to alternative forms of writing and expression. There is a danger in assuming any singular form of

knowledge production should be deemed the dominant platform through which students from various backgrounds are forced to engage. There is currently work being done in spaces such as Wikipedia and other open-source digital spaces that are undoing the work of centuries of Western knowledge production. Video games as an interactive medium are just one of the many ways we can encourage students to *see themselves* within the process of curating and producing information to be passed down within institutionalized spaces. It is a genuinely cathartic experience to have been given the privilege to work on a project that allowed for engagement with alternative forms of media literacy, and we hope to expand this work both pedagogically and as a method of practicing self-care within higher education.

The Personas: Who Are These Characters For in the Outside World?

Character creation of this game was influenced mainly by two sectors of the anticipated audiences that could engage with this content in a multitude of ways. One is the CUNY student, ideally within a college setting as a playtesting opportunity for the game to serve as a model for students to engage with alternative writing strategies. Alex Carter is very much the gateway for students to see themselves and the overall mental process of experiential writing. The other is the faculty, professors also ideally within the CUNY community, who can formulate empathy and deeper introspection through all of the characters, but particularly Professor Charleston who exists as the embodiment of the ultimate disconnect between student and faculty understanding. Meta-reflection we hope might inspire opposite ends of the spectrum to re-think effective learning strategies to be applied within diverse learning environments.

Alex Carter (The CUNY Student). This work attempts to appeal to personas across the board through the role of Alex Carter, the main character that the player plays as within the

game. We crafted Alex's character with the idea that she would remain relatively ambiguous in a majority of the aspects that make up one's identity. Alex serves as a silhouette for the player to step into. The ambiguity is an underlying theme throughout several of the potential paths taken throughout the game as Alex dives into her personal struggles with many intersecting issues surrounding her own race, cultures, and more. We wanted to ensure that each essay prompt was reflective of each of these more painful aspects of Alex's identity (gender, sexuality, race, health/disability). Within each prompt, for example, "gender," the player is posed with making a choice within two narrative "drafts" of an intended memory she will choose to write about. Each narrative choice is a parallel story that requires the player to painfully pick apart at Alex's lived experience in a way that can feel more invasive than introspective.

Furthermore, the purpose of creating Alex to be so malleable is to embody the student body of CUNY. The CUNY system aims to serve one of the most diverse student bodies in existence, so we are trying to appeal to as many different identities as possible. As a result, Alex Carter became a universal persona in herself.

The Professor. When thinking of the instructor within the game specifically, Professor Michael Charleston is a person we often see in academia as a faculty member who can be blissfully ignorant of how powerful and dangerous their use of language is. We forget that these power dynamics can create a level of communication that is potentially harmful to our students, who are often in very critical periods of their lives. This game and its message can be molded to fit within a pedagogical toolkit to help improve the communication between faculty and students.

The other role would be that of the actual classroom instructor. Any faculty member who seeks a more simple way to intersect their course content with the digital world may end up

referring to this project. *Twine* is a stellar way to introduce digital humanities practices into the humanities/art classroom. It is incredibly user-friendly and easy to learn, making the journey into the digital unknown a lot less intimidating. In [Ryan Cordell's](#) essay, "[How Not to Teach Digital Humanities](#)," he addresses the technique in which we aim to implement this type of project to undergraduate students. Cordell (2015) explains the process of how one should introduce the conceptual pedagogical thinking of digital humanities in pieces in order to slowly build up student confidence in participating in larger digital humanities projects and studies. We often see professors do this using Wikipedia, this is a similar take on the same concept.

This project could also be used by a professor who aims to diversify the content of their classroom. We are trying to use this work as a way of dismantling the expectation to use the traditional Western literary canon by giving voice to our diverse student body mentioned above. This game sparks inquiry about what we value in terms of experiential learning within higher education, a generally controversial topic.

Zoey. This character's role serves to demonstrate the mediation of power dynamics within the college writing process. Although Zoey is Alex's peer, her position grants her the authority to critique Alex's writing despite their equal positions within the institution. The dismantling of power dynamics within the learning process is a necessary topic we wanted to integrate into the game whilst demonstrating to the player some of the discourse that may still arise as the approach was not facilitated in a way that successfully stimulated Alex to write the "perfect" experiential essay. Zoey also indirectly represents the Writing Center as a resource Alex chooses to reach out to, despite her reluctance to seek assistance given the sensitive subject matter. Is it truly easier for Alex to share some of her life experiences with a peer rather than

Professor Charleston? Would it have been the same? Would Alex have been better without an extra voice in her head before attempting a rough draft? These questions are ultimately up to the player to contemplate against their own writing strategies. Zoey is a representation of student-run resources, but as much of the tone of the game, there are limitations or fallacies when the learning process is assumed to be universal, neglecting the individual experiences of students such as Alex, who may fall between the cracks.

Environmental Constraints

Now that I have covered the metacognitive thinking behind the development of the game, which is the immense foundation for the entire implementation of this project, I can dive into putting this digital platform into praxis. I am an Adjunct Instructor for the English Department at the New York City College of Technology (City Tech), a senior college within the CUNY system, located in Brooklyn, New York. I joined the department in late August of 2019, just in time to work on implementing this work into the course I was given to teach. I was assigned ENG1101, City Tech's English Composition I course, required by all majors at the college. All of the pieces of the puzzle were coming together, for City Tech was a perfect campus to implement this type of work. City Tech was already working on progressive digital spaces for learning, such as the development and use of their open educational resource (OER) platform, [OpenLab](#). The college is also unique in that it offers both two-year degrees as well as four-year degrees. Upon arrival, I met with my department chair about utilizing *Twine* in my classroom, and it was met with excitement. Experimenting with new pedagogies was welcomed, however, I soon learned that I had to structure my course around the expectations of the First-Year Writing Program.

Outlining the Curriculum

The English department at City Tech has a sub-department, the First-Year Writing Program, that works specifically on the composition courses (ENG1101 and ENG1121). Recently, the program decided to overhaul the goals of their outlined curriculum to focus in on students' abilities to metacognitively reflect on their writing, their process, and their improvement over the term of their courses. The program has been slowly rolling out these new goals by selecting groups of English faculty members to undergo a series of paid training sessions over the course of many weeks. Given I am new to the department, I have not yet undergone this training, but I still made an effort to incorporate some of their requirements into my course's curriculum so that when I eventually do, it will not be a rough transition.

I was admittedly thrown into teaching my course section without ample time to prepare and develop a curriculum that fit the parameters of this project. As a part-time lecturer of the department, I was given a selection of textbooks to assign within my course. While using an expensive textbook goes against my goals as an aspiring open education technologist, I did not have any say as a second-year graduate student just joining the college. I ended up choosing a textbook that best embodied the identity-oriented pedagogy that I was aiming to foster in my course, *The Place Where We Dwell: Reading and Writing about New York City* (3rd Edition), a collection of literature about New York City edited by Juanita But, Mark Noonan, and Sean Scanlan (2014). This textbook worked because nearly 100% of my students were native New Yorkers or have now lived in the city for some time. Having readings based on experiences that all of us share as New York residents provides us with a lot of common ground to expand student

literary and technical skills. However, while I find the book useful for creating a framework based on student experience, I do have qualms with it given it was one of my only options and it was published by City Tech faculty members, but that would open an entirely different conversation.

So I had my textbook decided on, now it was time to actually create a syllabus that catered to the goals of this project as well as English Composition I at City Tech. My course was made up of three units based on the First-Year Writing Program's new standards:

1. Basic Literacy and Rhetorical Skills (August-September)
2. The Communities Around Us (Community Discourses/Genre) (September-October)
3. Technology, Society, and Your Experiences (Research/Projects) (November-December)

Both units one and two served a similar purpose in terms of reaching the goal of this research. During the first unit, we established goodwill in the classroom between not only myself and my students, but each other as well. I decided to have an online classroom space hosted on the [CUNY Academic Commons](#), an OER platform dedicated to serving all 25 of CUNY's campuses throughout the five boroughs of New York City. Our class group on the Commons was where students would submit blog post assignments to a forum, where they could also see other students' responses. The purpose of this was so that students could start the time by sharing their experience with reading and writing, their strengths, their weaknesses, as well as a little bit about themselves. This created a sense of transparency in the classroom, fostering an idea that we were working as a team to improve everybody's skills by the end of the term. After that was

established, unit one was spent diving into some of the textbook's lighter readings so that I could gauge and build some of their basic literacy skills.

In unit two, we started to get into the good stuff. We got into the larger readings within the text, ones that began to draw many contemporary social issues into question. My students represented a very diverse set of backgrounds, coming from many varying cultures, ranging abilities, some being immigrants, and even some being young parents. The stories we read sparked inquiry in so many ways, ranging from discussions surrounding the rise of hip hop and its relationship with the drug crisis, what it is like to navigate the metropolitan area as a pregnant woman or as somebody with a physical disability, the political happenings surrounding the New York Police Department, how gentrification has played a role in their respective neighborhoods/upbringing, and even how graffiti art is criminalized while society commends the practice of artists such as Banksy, who in reality has the same practice as many taggers in the city. What was great about this was that we were able to open up the floor to foster perspectives from varying community discourses on each topic, all of which linked us back to the underlying theme of identity within society, ourselves, and the course.

Technology & Games Unit

Unit three is where all of the action happens! This is the final unit of the course, which took place between the very start of November and went about a week into December of the Fall 2019 semester. I had to spend my term leading up to this unit gathering materials and readings to use to help support the theory behind why we were taking a deep look at technology and video games so that my students understood the purpose. With both of these already being such

controversial topics, I had to do some serious convincing for my non-gamer students. First, I had them all play our game, then, I tied it together with all of our prior lessons using readings and other forms of media.

Introducing Our Game

After several meetings with my two advisors on this research, Maura Smale & Carlos Hernandez, both avid games scholars, I decided the best way to get the deepest response out of my students was to have them play through a couple of endings within our developed game, and then have them probe the game deeper using a series of questions in a Google Forms survey. I booked a computer classroom in City Tech's Ursula C. Schwerin Library, which featured a room full of desktop computers, and had them all play it solo.

The Initial Survey. This initial survey was developed with mostly pedagogical purposes in mind. I made sure to ask questions that would get everybody thinking about their experience while playing the game and how they as the player felt upon receiving the responses that they did from Professor Charleston. The survey left the answer box open to long-form responses so that students were able to fully explain their journey through the game. The survey included the following six questions, and under each question is a brief summary of the popular responses given amongst the students:

1. Which 2-3 paths did you choose? Why did you choose them?

While the secondary path chosen was pretty mixed, the number one chosen path on Alex's self-reflective journey was actually the path that dove into concepts related to

culture. Given the wide-diversity in my class, a majority of them wrote in their responses that they chose this path because they felt that they could relate to it and see themselves within that conversation.

2. How do you think the character in the game felt upon reading the feedback they received?

There was an array of responses to this one, many touching on Alex feeling disappointed, confused, annoyed, but what stuck out the most was this idea of Alex feeling misunderstood. Multiple students responded talking about feeling worse about themselves (themselves being the character) upon receiving the feedback from the professor.

3. How do you think the professor felt about his performance/the feedback he gave?

This question was met with a flurry of responses stating that the professor obviously felt as though he was giving helpful feedback and that he felt *no remorse* for how he responded to Alex's experiences. Also, I noticed a trend of deep fixation on Alex constantly receiving a C-range grade.

4. How do you think the professor's comments affected the character?

I appreciated the responses in this section because they were quite defensive of Alex. A lot of students made comments on how the professor was tearing down Alex's confidence, and how he made her feel ashamed. Some even made comments along the

lines of the professors “bashing his students down” and there being a desperate need to “improve the professor’s perception.”

5. How did you feel about the ending(s) you reached? Opinions? Shared experiences?

Several responses discussed how the ending was “enlightening, relatable, troubling” and many students went on to compare their experiences with similar situations. They even went into courses that weren’t writing centered, such as math, and how they feel these types of responses evoke a strong emotional response on the basis of things such as gender.

6. What is your attitude towards video games altogether? What are your opinions on them?

A majority of my students answered this question with indifference. Most of them said that video games are fun, within reason. They discuss how we see a lot of people today who allow video games to take over their lives. Some discussed using it as a form of escapism, and a few stated either their undying love or absolute hate for them.

Post-Gameplay Discussion

At City Tech, ENG1101 course sections are divided into two class sessions of lectures a week, and one hour of writing lab a week. For the day of introducing our game, I spent the lecture time allowing them to play the game through and answering the survey with in-depth responses. In our lab hour, we then had a conversation about the ramifications of *How Have Your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?*. This conversation with my class was so cathartic and eye-

opening for myself in two ways: first, as a game developer who had spent hours crafting that complex narrative with a specific mission in mind and seeing that goal come to life, and second, as an educator who wants to have these difficult conversations and increase student activism, awareness, and sense of deservingness within their own education. My students began to make points that even I, one of the creators, had not even thought of.

For starters, our aim to make Alex Carter a shadow for the player to step into was a huge success. The first chunk of our lab was spent debating whether or not Alex identified as a boy or girl, and some students even went on to make the decided statement that Alex was non-binary and used they/them pronouns. While Gomez and I had discussed branching the game out further to encompass even more identities, we did not feel comfortable appropriating the experiences we ourselves have not had. In the future, we would love to create more equity in the gender path by bringing on a trans co-developer comfortable enough to share their own experiences within the game.

Another silly, but interesting, thing was how many students fixated on the first choice they are given in the game: Whether to [[take the stairs]] or [[take the elevator]]. There was a lot of controversy amongst them on whether it would have made a difference. While Gomez and I inserted that choice at the start of the game as a gimmick to express the illusion of choice, some students took it very seriously and questioned if taking the elevator (which actually only results in Alex seeing that it is out of order) would have saved them time to work on Alex's essay and result in a better grade.

Lastly, we had a very rich conversation when talking about Professor Charleston, high school and college curriculum, and higher education. I facilitated a conversation about what experiences are prioritized and studied within education, resulting in the way professors communicate with students and how it affects the varying demographics of students. Some of my students spoke to their own experiences with teachers and peers, and we even discussed ways to improve this across the education system as a whole.

Structuring the Students' Own Game-Creation Projects

Now that the students had been exposed to what an interactive-fiction built in *Twine* looks like, it was time to have them build one themselves. This was a new realm they were entering, so I decided to give them instructions piece by piece. After our discussion, we broke into groups of four that would be known as their "Game Groups." These groups would serve as a form of workshopping groups.

The goal of the project was for everyone to pick a pivotal moment in their lives that helped to shape their identity today. I asked them to take the weekend to think about it, and I instructed them to post a blog to our forum explaining what memory they chose and why. I was able to quickly survey the ideas proposed and made sure everyone was in the same headspace as they went into this new and exciting process. Every week on the day we had our writing lab, some time was spent updating their group members about their progress with writing and creation. After the blog post, they had to do a story draft, which was a short essay outlining all of the aspects of this life event that they want to showcase. The challenging part for them was writing it in a way that slightly removed themselves, just enough so that the player could place

themselves in it a bit as well, but most were successful in doing so. Once we reached the point in the process where their stories were finalized, we then had to learn how to use *Twine*.

I had booked the computer classroom again and conducted a skills lab on using *Twine*. Now that my students had their stories laid out in document format, it would be a smooth transition. The students who had their final story drafts prepared and ready to go went on to copy and paste chunks of their work into *Twine*. They learned the basic functionalities of linking to new story panels, as well as some text-modifications such as italicizing, bolding, underlining, and strikethroughs. These skills are very small-scale, but it's crucial that they start small-scale and then built upon so that they are not overwhelmed.

It seemed students were having a lot of fun seeing their own narratives come to life digitally through this interactive method! A lot of them were smiling, gasping at discoveries, expressing much excitement, and more. They were given another week and a half (which included a holiday break) to finalize their games, export them to files, and send them to me. Upon our return from the holiday, we had what I referred to as our “gaming showcase.”

Gaming Showcase & Exit Surveys

I wanted to make sure we celebrated the class's accomplishments in creating these games, so for one last time, I booked the computer classroom so that everybody could showcase their creation. Everyone made their *Twine* game full-screen, and we all played them! When somebody finished playing, they brought it back to the start, got up, and went to play a new one until we played everybody's projects! There was an incredibly wide variety of monumental moments that were made to be immersive and interactive, I was blown away. Topics ranged from learning the

responsibilities of being a pet owner to making friends in high school, to the pain of losing one of your closest friends, to the experience of dealing with an altercation on the subway. One of my personal favorites was by a student who had a passion for kickboxing. He had ended up gamifying his first experience in the ring, which led to the player deciding which moves to perform and ultimately determine whether or not he won the match. I was incredibly excited and so were my students, making for an incredibly successful project. Similar to when we started playing games, I had them respond to an exit survey to see how they felt about the unit and our experiences throughout the month of digital literacy training. The exit survey included the following seven questions, and under each question is a brief summary of the popular responses given amongst the students:

1. How was the transition from doing solely classroom readings to including video games? Did you enjoy it? Why or why not?

The common thread throughout every response was that taking this route in an English class was the last thing they expected, but they had a lot of fun with it. They really appreciated being able to see the stories that molded their peers, and some of them even commented on how it was very helpful for them as someone with a learning disability to step away from the traditional and try something completely new.

2. What was the difference between playing the games we played and making your own game?

The responses to this question were fun because they touched on a dozen different aspects that go into making an interactive-narrative. They touched on the struggles of

making it entertaining enough, engaging enough, real enough, small technical challenges, creating alternate endings, and more. However, they also expressed the exciting difference in that they had lived their gamic reality, which made it an overall enjoyable experience.

3. What were some of the challenges you faced while making your game? Did you overcome them or change routes?

Going off some of the points made in the previous responses, they got into more depth about the challenges of writing. Many of them discussed the struggle of minimizing the experience so that their game was not too long, whilst not minimizing the emotions and growth that came with it. They also particularly struggled with wording the choices in the narrative as well as how to create a satisfying conclusion.

4. Now that you've created and played games alongside your classmates, do you feel it was different being the creators of knowledge/experience rather than just reading someone else's work?

“YES” (entirely capitalized) was the popular response. The responses all shared the idea that they were very excited by the fact that we were reading and engaging with *their* work, commenting on and relating to their experience, and how great that felt in comparison to trying to find our relationship with another reading. Also, a lot of these responses mentioned it raising their confidence as writers. During the activity, I noticed many of them complementing each other, even classmates who had never spoken before.

5. Did you feel the materials (games, readings, etc) were presented well?

These responses were collectively shorter in that they talk about how they felt 80% of the games were brilliant, with there being the exception of the games that were clearly rushed. They commented on spelling, grammar, and length in a surprisingly critical way, comparing and contrasting what makes for a good narrative experience versus a bad one.

6. How will creating this game help you tackle projects in the future?

The top three points tackled amongst these answers was that the game-making project has helped to improve time management, creative thought process, and writing capabilities.

7. Lastly, has your attitude towards the concept of video games changed since the first game we played?

While the responses varied a bit, the popular response was from people who had not cared much for games prior to this experience. Many of them talked about having a deeper appreciation for video games as a form of creative expression. Now having seen how much time and energy goes into just the bare-bones version of a simple digital platform, they see how it can be considered a form of art and how it can be utilized for social change, as we had discussed in our lectures throughout the unit.

Supplemental Readings & Media

Throughout the course of this unit, we constantly referred back to *How Have Your Experiences Shaped Your Paper?* when discussing scholarship on identity and technology for it successfully became a widely-encompassing foundation for all of our discussions during this period. Below is a mini-annotated bibliography of the readings used to support the game project throughout the final unit of the course.

1. Kishonna Gray & David J Leonard's (2018) [Woke Gaming](#), more specifically, the introduction of the book titled "Not a Post-Racism and Post-Misogyny Promised Land: Video Games as Instruments of (In)Justice." Used to introduce games to the class, this piece (and book as a whole) explores how the 2016 election has radicalized the current political climate, and how video games as a cultural and digital medium has been influenced as a result of our socio-political society. It emphasizes the need to recognize game studies as a platform for critical engagement within the humanities as a tool for addressing issues of race, gender, sexuality, and health disability.
2. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (2009) "[The Danger of a Single Story](#)" TED Talk brings the concept of identity to the surface. Shown during a class lecture, it begins to form the bridge between unit two and unit three, for it highlights exactly what we've been arguing against since early on in the term.
3. Bonnie Ruberg's (2015) "[No Fun: The Queer Potential of Video Games That Annoy, Anger, Disappoint, Sadden, and Hurt](#)." explores the fundamental notion of the potential and danger of games attempting to portray and dictate an entire perspective outside of

one's own experience. Rather than leading into stereotypes and other problematic narrative junctures, Ruberg urges game creators to spark inquiry into game narrative and perspectives rather than expect any cultural medium to totally encompass an aspect of one's lived experience. This reading was not only a strong drive in the creation of our game but also a great connector between Adichie and the aims of our unit.

4. Nicholas Carr's (2013) "[All Can Be Lost: The Risk of Putting Our Knowledge in the Hands of Machines](#)" sparked a very interesting discussion around technology and its relationship to our skills as workers. These conversations are at the center of my students' interests for most of them are young and experiencing machines replacing humans in many professional spaces.
5. Ian Bogost's (2011) *How to Do Things with Videogames*, specifically Chapter 2: Empathy, offers interesting yet arguable points around the idea of empathy within gaming. Are we able to force the player to feel something? Is there a lesson in this? Can empathy be taught? Why or why not? We talked extensively about the sensitivity of content within certain realms of media, gaming, and non-gaming.
6. Nicholas Carr's (2008) "[Is Google Making Us Stupid?](#)" and Clay Shirkey's (2010) "Does the Internet Make You Smarter?" work well together in a lesson because they act as a foil to one another. What I had my students do, after we had a brief discussion surrounding these topics, was to break up into two teams and debated these ideas. They all faced one another and had a conversation with one another, which me essentially acting as an MC. It was a very successful and engaging way to review the pros and cons from a more objective standpoint.

7. As a class, we played a game titled [*Date Night*](#) (2018), in which we made decisions during a date. However, the twist is that there is utter chaos happening in the world surrounding the date. There is a Nazi protest outside the restaurant and there's violence occurring, but the protagonist is only fixated on how the date is going/how it went. This helped us to foster a conversation surrounding privilege, the political happenings around the world, and where our priorities lie as a society.
8. We played two games called [*Green-Eyed Monster*](#) (2019) and [*You, A Man and A Knife*](#) (2018). The first was about an alien invasion, where all the items you could use throughout the game to fight/protect yourself/progress in the narrative were items found throughout Shakespearean works. The second was a very simple linguistic commentary, where you had three selections and your combination elicited a painfully literal response from the game. We used these games as a foundation for a conversation about how gamification could be a tool to improve curriculum and writing, such as Shakespeare, which is generally challenging for young students to navigate.
9. We played [*Autowrong*](#) (2019), which was a unique *Twine* game formatted like the iMessage application featured on Apple devices. It was simply a narrative about a young married couple communicating, but both were relying on autocorrect, as most of us do. When we chose responses, sometimes there would be an autocorrect typo, which the game gave us varying timers to correct before eliciting a response from our spouse based on what our phone corrected our chosen message to. What made this fun was that my class was almost entirely young students who relied on this from an early age, so we then did an activity where for the weekend everybody had to turn off their autocorrect and

auto-capitalization features. In the following class, we discussed in detail our struggles and the implications behind this dependency.

10. Jamie Woodcock's (2019) book, *Marx at the Arcade*, features a chapter titled "Role-Playing, Simulation, and Strategy," which my students and I used to think about the idea of simulation and how we as players/humans place ourselves in fantasy scenarios. We had a gamic-focus, but also considered the ways in which we do these across all forms of media and interaction.

Next Steps: Adjustments for the Future

To preface the next steps envisioned for expanding this work, I would like to note that many goals were outlined to take on across the semesters of 2020. However, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the effects it had on higher education, New York City, City University of New York, and the world, some limitations were forced upon this project in the Spring 2020 semester. Initially, there was going to be the second run of this curriculum in another section of English Composition I at the New York City College of Technology, but the university decided to switch to online distance learning for the remainder of the term due to public health and safety reasons. I had switched my course to asynchronous learning using our online classroom space, and as a result, I had to scrap the *Twine* project from the curriculum. It would have been incredibly unfair and simply poor pedagogical practice to expect them to take on entirely new software without my direct guidance as well as the support of their classmates. Lastly, given that New York State went into a shelter-in-place and was forced to practice social distancing, I had to push some minor goals of the project back, but have been polishing the game and writing about the experience and guide in the meantime.

Now that I have undergone the process of creating and implementing this gaming/technology curriculum from scratch, I noticed many areas where I can add more scaffolding and improve the process for my next set of students. The major changes would be in regards to scaffolding the writing for the game. Students who were on track with their story drafts were able to fully engage during the *Twine* skills lab I conducted, while students who did not have it finished were scrambling to put something together. I'm not a fan of grades as a whole, but I am currently looking into ways to scaffold the project so that students will have to be more prepared as we reach the later stages of the project.

Many faculty members are filled with apprehension towards incorporating digital game-based learning into their classroom out of fear that the technology will create unintended barriers, but *Twine* avoids a significant amount of obstacles through the simplicity of the software. The only minor challenge I faced during the implementation process was that certain web browsers did not download files from the web-version of *Twine* correctly. I strongly encouraged students to download the free version of the software directly to their computer in order to avoid this entirely. For the few students who chose to use the web-based version and ran into this issue, they just needed to open *Twine* in a different browser and copy-paste their work over, which only took minutes.

I have recently updated the CSS of the game and added more interactive features, but what I envision for the final stage of this project is for our product itself to be a functioning, playable game that features multimedia content such as text, images, and sound effects/music. I am also learning how to code dialogue boxes into *Twine*, so we have discussed bringing an artist on to create visuals for Professor Charleston and Zoey as well. Throughout the duration of the

upcoming 2020-2021 academic year, we hope to also expand Professor Charleston's "feedback" with more suggestive options within each prompt that will include images and sound to further enhance the experience.

Gomez and I had built our game with the goal of it being used in public higher education facilities, particularly (but not limited to) around the City University of New York system, in order to spark inquiry in regards to technological means of alternative ways of conducting scholarly writing, and so I exit my final term within our M.A. program in Digital Humanities with a completed game and teaching materials to make available to the CUNY community. The instructional guide (see other PDF) contains materials such as readings, videos, games, and references to my experience and game-based pedagogical theory so that they can effectively adapt this work to their own course setting. With more work, this tool can introduce game-studies within academia under the large tent that is digital humanities, more specifically geared towards undergraduate-level students.

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