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**PUSHING UNDERSTANDING: CURRICULUM RESOURCES  
FOR DIGITAL PEDAGOGUES**

**BY: M. Rubin**

**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**

**2022**

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# **Pushing Understanding: Curriculum Resources for Digital Pedagogues**

By M. Rubin

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

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Capstone Project Advisor

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## *Abstract*

Pushing Understanding: Curriculum Resources for Digital Pedagogues

by

M. Rubin

Advisor: Jeffrey Allred

Whether one wishes to admit it or not, the classroom is a distinct and separate space from the rest of the world with its own rules, expectations, and environment. Even when a class takes place outside of a classroom, the space takes on the role of a classroom, if not outright becoming a classroom in every form aside from shape. This is not unlike, for instance, a tabletop game: even if not played on a literal tabletop, a tabletop game remains identifiable as such, and its rules and expectations remain the same, as does even its environment. A course may depart from the conventions of standard lectures and readings without making use of the classroom as a space, or even examining the more metaphorical or narrative space within the course's material, which in many senses is as distinct a space as the classroom itself. While this may be a non-issue for some, and sometimes a non-issue in general depending on the course in question, this sort of intimate engagement with material could introduce meaningful, yet seldom-encountered layers of learning, thinking, and interest.

The project's purpose is to serve as a resource to those in the Digital Humanities, and in similar or adjacent areas of study who seek to broaden their horizons, or who are interested in teaching the topics present in one or more of the project's syllabi but lack the resources needed to create material of their own that covers those topics. The project's components engage with emergent scholarly topics in manners that are not only critical and meaningful, but that are more

kinetic, hands-on, and most importantly, making the most of the classroom as a distinct space for not only learning, but on a more general level, experiencing.

## *Acknowledgements*

*Pushing Understanding* was no small task, but throughout working on it, I was never alone: a result of people I've met and worked with, and have been influenced by.

I would like to extend a special thanks to Andie Silva and Shawna Brandle for running Digital Pedagogy and Digital Pedagogy II. Without these courses, I would never have thought of writing syllabi for courses in and around the Digital Humanities. It is because of these two professors as well that I came to properly think about aspects of accessibility, both in terms of creating and engaging with projects.

This project would also not have been possible without Jeffrey Allred and Matt Gold, and not simply because of their advisory status. In the case of the former, Allred not only guided me as I worked on the project, but also exposed me to various key projects, texts, and ideas, including the *Ivanhoe* project, during my time as his student. In the case of the latter, Gold's guidance in the *Introduction to the Digital Humanities* course is what got me properly invested in the Digital Humanities at all, and it was in this class that I was introduced to not only grant writing, but also one of the most important texts I've ever engaged with: Stephen Ramsay's *Reading Machines: Towards and Algorithmic Criticism*.

Other CUNY faculty including, but certainly not limited to Aránzazu Borrachero Mendivil, Bret Maney, Lisa Rhody, and Wayne Kostenbaum, through their classes and material, were at least partially responsible for this project's form. NYU's Yevgeniya Traps, Barton Bishop, Antonio Rutigliano, and Joshua Shirkey and the classes I took with them were also incredibly influential on *Pushing Understanding*.

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## *Digital Manifest*

1. Capstone white paper (.pdf)
2. GitHub repository (.zip, <https://github.com/mattofmystery/pushing-understanding/tree/main>)
  - a. Archived initial release (<https://github.com/mattofmystery/pushing-understanding/releases/tag/v1.0>)
  - b. Alternative branch with non-compressed files available (<https://github.com/mattofmystery/pushing-understanding/tree/non-zipped-materials>)
3. Syllabi and supplements, accessible on GitHub page (.docx files in .zip files):
  - a. *Forming a Corpus: An Invitation to the Digital Humanities* syllabus and projects
  - b. *Hypertexts and Digital Literature* syllabus and projects
  - c. *Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts* syllabus and projects
  - d. *Forms of Narratives and the Narrative* syllabus and projects
  - e. *Snake's Coils: Underhanded Tactics in Art and Problem Solving* syllabus and sample exam
  - f. *That's Just Cruel: Abuse, Fairness, and Respect in Analysis and Learning* syllabus and simulation information

### **Note on Technical Specifications**

*Pushing Understanding* is hosted on GitHub in the form of a repository. Those interested will be able to freely download any of the project's syllabi and corresponding supplements.

*Pushing Understanding*'s material is licensed under the Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International license.

## *Environmental Scan*

There are many projects and other efforts that already exist that aim to develop curriculum. Some are in the Digital Humanities, some are some combination of hands-on, play-based, and open, some cover niche subjects, and some combine all of these elements. However, while a given curriculum can absolutely have overlap with any other given curriculum, this not only isn't necessarily negative, but unlike with, for instance, web tools or research projects, it's very difficult to have such a degree of overlap that two pieces of curriculum make one another redundant. Of course, there is also the matter of the similarity between curricula or a piece of curriculum having overlap with works outside its realm.

*Pushing Understanding's* particular parameters exists in an environment that isn't particularly rich in resources like it. There are large open and semi-open resources that are readily available, such as the CUNY Commons or the MLA Commons, and even smaller scale equivalents like Ian Bogost's website. However, these are all structurally quite different from *Pushing Understanding*. This is in part due to tenure and promotion policies rarely rewarding the production of open resources, and because of the sheer amount of effort it takes to create resources, promote them, and make them usable by others.

## **101up**

“101up: Implementation of a Gamified Curriculum to Increase Self-Regulated Learning Skills and Motivation for At-Risk Students in a First-Year Experience Course: An Action Research Study” is a project that aims to use gamification to aid specifically at-risk students adapt to undergraduate life and study. The project focuses on meeting three basic needs outlined in Richard Ryan and Edward L. Deci’s Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In hindsight, reading up on Ryan and Deci’s work could have helped me to refine *Pushing Understanding* further.

*Pushing Understanding* and “101up” have similar goals, in that they both attempt to use aspect of play and/or games to augment curriculum and study to better convey subjects and appeal to certain styles of learning. However, the latter is tailored significantly more towards a specific demographic, and one that is significantly more specific than *Pushing Understanding*’s. “101up” also focuses much more on games than play, as evidenced by its use of elements such as “quests”, “leveling-up,” and “badges.” Finally, it was impacted significantly by the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas *Pushing Understanding*’s development was affected only very indirectly, if at all.

## Ivanhoe

The *Ivanhoe* project describes itself as a WordPress theme “a gateway to textual play” that “encourages collaborative and reflective interpretation of shared texts.” It was developed by the 2014-15 Praxis Program Fellows at the University of Virginia’s Scholar’s Lab and can be accessed at <https://ivanhoe.scholarslab.org>. In practice, *Ivanhoe* can be used to role play, in a manner not unlike text-based variants of games like *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Vampire: the Masquerade*, but in a manner where participants take on roles “within or around” the text in question. To a degree, it allows one to “play” a text as though it were a game, but it manages to do this with relatively low amounts of gamification: I will speak more about this later on, but it’s much more rooted in the realm of “mimicry” or “simulation” than in, for instance, skill or luck. In essence, *Ivanhoe* self-describes as a “game,” but playing through something facilitated by *Ivanhoe* wouldn’t necessarily be gaming, at least not in the same manner as *101up* attempts to gamify via gameplay elements.

*Ivanhoe* and *Pushing Understanding* of course differ fundamentally in structure, and *Pushing Understanding* has more substantially emphasis on educational use. *Pushing Understanding* also covers material outside written works, and has content that is admittedly more game-like than *Ivanhoe*, such as *Twine* projects. However, it cannot be said that *Ivanhoe* didn’t provide at least some direction for what I aimed for with *Pushing Understanding*, and my personal experience with *Ivanhoe* was certainly a formative one in this regard.

## *Narrative*

### Intro: At a Glance

*Pushing Understanding* is a collection of pedagogical resources centered on six innovative syllabi for semi-OER courses that rely on hands-on learning, simulation, critical reflection, and play-based pedagogy. The courses encompass a wide range of approaches and topics, from surveys to more niche subjects in and around the discipline of the Digital Humanities. Course titles include:

- *Forming a Corpus: An Invitation to the Digital Humanities*
- *Hypertexts and Digital Literature*
- *Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts*
- *Forms of Narratives and the Narrative*
- *Snake's Coils: Underhanded Tactics in Art and Problem Solving*
- *That's Just Cruel: Abuse, Fairness, and Respect in Analysis and Learning*

The beginning of *Pushing Understanding*'s development began far before its proper inception: that is, some components of the syllabi that now form *Pushing Understanding* came into being before the project's abstract was even written. The *Forming a Corpus* and the *Hypertexts and Digital Literature* syllabi were conceptualized prior to the project, and served as a significant anchoring point for what the project would become. Even in their earlier states, both of these syllabi focused on somewhat niche material that requires direct and self-guided interaction to engage with.

At its base level, *Pushing Understanding* was inspired by Michael J. Cripps' "Gamification Fails: Negotiating Points, Badges, Levels, and Game Play in the Basic Writing Classroom," parts of Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*, specifically her discussion of the abject, and Roger Caillois's *Man, Play, and Games*. Cripps' work provided something of a problem that could need solving. There, he reflects on his attempts at "gamifying" a course, adding elements of gaming into a classroom for the purposes of closing an "engagement gap," or to encourage students to engage more with both the material and one another. As evidenced by the title, Cripps views his attempts as largely unsuccessful, writing that some of the elements he attempted to add ("experience points" and "levels") "might seem juvenile to some." However, he concedes that "if earning XPs and leveling up can change [classroom behaviors]" for the better, it may be worth adding them back to the course: in his words, "why not put those elements back in a course?" (Cripps)

The syllabi in *Pushing Understanding* take advantage of the fact that the classroom is a "consecrated spot" (Huzinga 10). For instance, *Forms of Narratives and the Narrative* regularly uses class periods (and sometimes the classroom space) to engage in activities that move beyond traditional pedagogical modalities, such as lectures, discussions, seminars, and examinations. These activities are partially meant to serve purposes analogous to those that one might find in a class more traditionally grounded in the sciences, in the sense that such courses often have "practical" elements, such as lab work. However, their greater purpose is to make use of the classroom as something within what play theory calls a "magic circle" while avoiding the kind of instrumentalist "gamification" Cripps references in his above self-critique, as well as the merely cosmetic changes that keep the basic shapes and rhythms of traditional classroom practice intact.

*Pushing Understanding* was partially founded on some of the ideas posed in Kathleen Yancy's "Made Not Only in Words: Composition in a New Key." To be more specific, she asks "if we cannot go home again to the days where print was the sole medium, what will the new curricular home for composition look like?" (Yancy 308) and proposes that "we move to a new model of composing where students are explicitly asked to engage" in certain considerations and activities in order to "develop as members of a writing public" (311). *Pushing Understanding*, to no small degree, was inspired by a line of thinking that was in turn inspired by Yancy's question – as composition, culture, and human behavior change, evolve, and adapt to the digital age, how too will education change?

*Pushing Understanding* replaces linear, sequential narrative modes, both in terms of the "primary texts" students read together and "metanarratives" of linear knowledge acquisition that govern traditional pedagogy. In this sense, it inspiration from Stephen Ramsay's *Reading Machines: Towards an Algorithmic Criticism*, particularly its discussion of digital work, and both by extension and independently, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus* and *Anti-Oedipus*, although its actual content is much more influenced by the former. Ramsay uses the term "algorithmic criticism" to refer to a largely theoretical "criticism derived from algorithmic manipulation of text" – he believes that this criticism "either does not exist or exists only in nascent form" (Ramsay 2).

While *Pushing Understanding* doesn't have a particularly strong focus on achieving or approaching this "algorithmic criticism" (at least outside of *Forming a Corpus*, which actually includes Ramsay's piece in its course material), it does focus on critically analyzing both digital and non-digital texts in an intertextual, possibly rhizomatic manner. That is, in part due to *Pushing Understanding*' frequent reliance on reflection-based assignments, its courses encourage

students to forge connections with course materials, starting and ending at a point they choose with no pre-determined start or end point – in a rhizomatic, visceral, lifelike weave of transference inspired by Deleuze and Guattari’s ideas (Deleuze et al. 53). Not only will students explore rhizomatic narratives in these courses as readers, but they will learn to write more rhizomatically, which aligns them with a tectonic shift in the way culture is produced, disseminated, and consumed via decentered networks, internet-based, or otherwise.

## Theoretical Focus and Praxis

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga writes that “there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the ‘consecrated spot’ cannot be formally distinguished from the playground.” He equates the “magic circle” not only to “the arena” and “the card table,” but also to “the temple, the stage, the screen, [and] the tribunal” (Huizinga 10). That is to say, not only do games occupy a metaphorical and often also physical space, but any sort of ritual could as well. If such a wide variety of rituals and locales have their own bounded space, what’s to say a classroom doesn’t as well? Indeed, discussions of the “classroom setting” and what begins and ends at the door to class are far from uncommon across pedagogical discourse.

Cripps’ reflections on gamification raise several important questions: can elements of games be added to a course in meaningful manner than changes classroom behaviors for the better, and if so how? How can they be added in a matter that isn’t overly frivolous, and that doesn’t reduce intrinsic motivation? In a sense, Cripps’ techniques appear heavy-handed and dissonant at points: to elaborate, by adding elements that are very clearly unmodified game elements to the classroom, there’s a clash between the class-proper and the game that Cripps seeks to partially transmogrify it into. One could almost say that it breaks one’s suspension of disbelief in a sense, or perhaps a certain sort of immersion. The idea of the “magic circle” is one that many have used when discussing games: the metaphorical boundary that separates the “world” of the game from the world outside it.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva writes about “a jouissance in which the subject is swallowed up but in which the Other, in return, keeps the subject from foundering by making it repugnant. One thus understands why so many victims of the abject are its fascinated victims—if

not its submissive and willing ones” (Kristeva 9). While Kristeva does touch on the work of Jacques Lacan, this quote’s relevance to *Pushing Understanding* has nothing to do with the Lacanian notion of “jouissance” – rather, it’s meant to refer to general joy and enjoyment. Kristeva speaks of a somewhat familiar occurrence, in which despite how awful something is, others can’t help but engage nonetheless: one might liken it to the idea that a car crash is horrible, but difficult to look away from for some reason or another. In particular, the syllabus for *That’s Just Cruel* is formed around this idea of direct confrontation with something unexpected and less-than-pleasant, but in a relatively safe environment and in a setting meant to provoke those affected into reflection, rather than simple trauma.

This, in turn, led to considerations of *Man, Play, and Games*, specifically Callois’ discussion of the play forms of “mimicry” and “ilinx.” The former is somewhat self-explanatory, referring to elements such as simulation and roleplay, while the latter is best described as vertigo, or perhaps nausea: Callois’ example of ilinx is “[producing] in oneself, by a rapid whirling or falling movement, a state of dizziness and disorder,” or to put it another way, spinning in circles for long enough that it makes one dizzy, a form of play that is common among young children (Callois 9). However, he also notes that “since mimicry and ilinx are always tempting to man, it is not easy to eliminate them from social life at the point where they have become merely children’s amusements or aberrant behavior” (Callois 129). Consider the existence of “mature-rated” roleplaying games, such as the *Elder Scrolls* franchise, or even the simple and very common experience of drinking alcohol: mimicry and ilinx are indeed “tempting” enough to humanity that they have pervaded everyday life and entertainment beyond childhood. That is, people other than children engage in “play,” and if one considers that much of what is encapsulated by ilinx (and even mimicry, as evidenced by Callois likening theater to it in

addition to Huizinga's mention of it) doesn't resemble a game at all, these temptations can exist outside the world of games.

It's important to keep Callois' ideas regarding what intrinsic characteristics define play. In brief, he writes that play is "free," "separate," "uncertain," "unproductive," "governed by rules," and "make-believe" – some of these speak for themselves, while others may require some elaboration (Callois 9-10). The first is meant to imply that one plays and ceases playing as one pleases. The second establishes the "magic circle" or "consecrated spot." The fourth refers to the idea that play should not generate any outside wealth or resources as a direct and inherent consequence. The sixth augments the second and adds an element of requiring a "special awareness" to discern the realm of play from the realm outside, and the third and fifth speak is fairly self-explanatory.

Essentially, *Pushing Understanding* has a basis in not simply games and gaming, but play and playing: it promotes playful courses, not gamified education. In other words, these courses integrate playful attitudes and gamelike structures into the traditional pedagogical goals of encouraging critical reflection; they don't attempt to knock what one could see as the square peg of the game into the round hole of a given course or piece of curriculum. With that in mind, *Pushing Understanding*'s components were designed to integrate specific modes of play into their cores. Remember that Cripps' issue was one of gamification – if one focuses not on the course itself being a game, but rather on introducing elements of play to the course for its own and their own sakes, one can theoretically avoid gamification and its "failures" altogether. Aside from mimicry andilinx, Callois also discusses "agon" and "alea," respectively skill-based competition and random chance.

The paragons of agon are definitively games: it would be difficult to argue that a one-on-one board game that relies overwhelmingly on the sheer knowledge and savvy of the players is not only a game, but one grounded in skill and competition. With his usage of leaderboards and other elements that allow students to compare themselves to one another and compete not only both directly and indirectly, but also both tangibly and intangibly, it's easy to view Cripps' experiment as something that attempts to shift the realm inside the classroom's "magic circle" into one that relies mostly on agon. One could assert that competition is an important part of education, but it is difficult to deny that competition as it exists is a stressor, and that it exists in no small quantity or visibility. While Cripps' experiment wasn't absolutely fruitless, Cripps himself emphasizes its "fails" in the title of his piece on it. In addition, it relied on gamification, which is something that *Pushing Understanding* doesn't try to outright avoid, but something that it deemphasizes: *Pushing Understanding* grounds itself inilinx and mimicry while downplaying agon.

The paragons of alea are similarly difficult to think of as anything other than games, although one could possibly argue that gambling is separate from gaming (granted, Callois would likely disagree with such a sentiment: he comments that "In certain of its manifestations, play is designed to be extremely lucrative or ruinous. This does not preclude the fact that playing for money remains completely unproductive. The sum of the winnings at best would only equal the losses of the other players" (Callois 5) or that the two are mutually exclusive. However, whether the paragons of alea are games or not, it cannot be denied that they rely tremendously on random chance. While one could possibly argue that it would be possible to create educational material that's grounded in random chance – rather than simply just having elements of it, such as a course in which a student picks a presentation topic out of a hat and random – this would be

directly antithetical to any sort of institution that aims to give all of its students anything resembling equal opportunity or a level playing field.

The paragons of mimicry, however, are perhaps most suited to a classroom environment, especially if engaged with in a thoughtful, critical, and analytical manner. Indeed, books, a veritable classroom staple, are in most cases far from games, and likely fall most under mimicry, or perhaps ilinx in the case of particularly long, complex, or otherwise difficult-to-digest reading material. Plays, movies, and other similar pieces often find their way into course material of classes in realm of the arts. However, one could absolutely argue that watching a play or reading a book is much different than, for instance, participating in the creation of a movie as an actor, or acting out the scenes of a book for some purpose or another. With this in mind, *Pushing Understanding*'s syllabi contain projects, lessons, and activities that may not occur to some as forms of play in most cases, but could absolutely be seen as forms of leisure or fun, and in a classroom environment, they actually may be closer to being forms of play.

Cripps' experiment's failures have roots in dissonance; specifically, bringing elements into the classroom that negatively conflict with the classroom and the class held within it. Cripps mentions an attempt to "inject 'fun' into the work" in his class: while this may be a stretch, this choice of wording alone brings to mind a struggle, or at the very least, a piercingly-strong force, rather than, perhaps, a mere "push." Rather than have students engage in, for instance, "active reading battles," or aim for things as gauche as a badge named after a character from a popular science-fiction franchise as a stand-in for (or with gamification in mind, perhaps a re-texture of) exemplary work, *Pushing Understanding* aims to blend interactive elements of play, leisure, and creativity with the near-universally-understood notion of achieving a good grade. Furthermore, rather than grade student performance in activities and lessons grounded in play, *Pushing*

*Understanding's* courses grade based on the critical reflection of students – students taking *Forms of Narratives and the Narrative*, for example, wouldn't be graded on the artistic quality of the artwork they created during the “still-life painting” in-class assignment during week 5, but rather on a reflection they would write about it, connecting it to other course material.

It's also important to bear in mind that mimicry includes mimesis. Watching a sport, for instance, isn't a game in and of itself, but it is a form of leisure, and one that doesn't violate Callois' core characteristics of play. While one could argue that watching a sport isn't “governed by rules” or “make-believe,” one could also argue that the rules that govern it simply include “spectators will watch the sport,” and that the “make-believe” aspect refers to the fact that spectators are not actually playing the game-proper. Additionally, one may identify with players on the field or some other aspect of the sport's culture or zeitgeist in a mimetic fashion.

Finally, the paragons of *ilinx* may well be the furthest from conventional or “proper” games of any of the forms of play, aside from maybe mimicry. At first, *ilinx* may appear to be incompatible with a classroom environment due to its apparent involvement of harmful or otherwise unpleasant forms of play (nausea, fatigue, pain, etc.) that generate “jouissance” in Kristeva's sense. However, it's necessary to remember that coursework is inherently rigorous: even in an incredibly easy class, coursework must be “completed” to some capacity. While a given assignment will be more challenging and tiring to some students than others, the assignment is still an assignment, and thus some amount of effort, even if miniscule, must be expended to complete it. In essence, obtaining a higher education is probably a form of *ilinx* on its own.

To clarify, yes, this implies that obtaining a higher education could well be seen as a form of play. To elaborate, first, assume that the above was adequate to proving that obtaining an education embodies ilinx. Obtaining a higher education is something that one does voluntarily, something that's separate and distinct from other activities, something with an unknown personal outcome, something that doesn't generate revenue or resources on its own (knowledge one gains could be seen as being obtained through "exchanges" with instructors), something that is governed by rules, and something that while real, also requires a specific form of awareness to engage with. In other words, here, a higher education embodies a form of play (ilinx) without defying any of the core characteristics of play.

Forms of play are not necessarily games, but higher education is certainly a form of play, and one that not only embodies ilinx, but one that embodies mimicry too. As convenient as it would be to assume that students exist, let alone act in the same ways outside the classroom as they do inside the classroom, this is simply not the case. Even the most studious individuals live and act differently outside the classroom by nature of the fact that upon exiting the classroom, they exit the classroom environment, or, interchangeably, the magic circle. To put it another way, when an individual enters a class they have signed up for as a student, they voluntarily-yet-possibly-unknowingly begin to play a role: that of a student in class.

There are of course uncountable ways for an individual to play this role simply due to sheer human variety. And then, when the student leaves class, the student goes back to being any number of things, which may or may not include a student, based on that individual's own identity. This is not merely transferring oneself from one form of play to another, as life in the modern world is hardly a form of play at all: it's functionally involuntary, it's inherently not separate, since it is what play is separate from, it is productive, it is governed by the very

ordinary laws that play seeks to subvert, and it requires no specific or special awareness to engage with. In essence, when one enters a classroom to participate in class, one begins a form of play, and when one exits that class, one ceases that form of play.

Through a play-based mode, it becomes possible to rethink education as a resource or an end. One could even view the entirety of an educational institution or body as one tremendous magic circle of its own – in this situation, one could envision higher education as a system in which students are invited into a Huizingan consecrated space for however-many years in order to explore their interests. Obtaining an undergraduate degree becomes less and less of a prestigious distinction and more and more of a simple necessity to function as an active and productive citizen, or just a means to achieve higher honors: with how expensive obtaining an undergraduate degree can be, this is especially problematic. And because of this increase in necessity, it becomes harder and harder for higher education to be viewable as anything even remotely play-adjacent, even if in reality, it doesn't directly cease being viable as a Calloisian form of play.

*Pushing Understanding* is meant to *push* play, understanding through play, and the understanding that higher education not only can, but has no reason to not be viewed as a form of play. As higher education becomes more commodified, less self-directed, and, for a lack of a less loaded term, “soulless,” there is a very real risk that curriculum could semi-arbitrarily shift to fit or reflect these trends. Of course, just as there is an uncountable number ways to play the role of a student, there are an uncountable number of learning styles and an uncountable number of interests that students can have. Even in a utopian world where fewer would have to pursue higher education simply to lead a productive life, most would probably argue that variety and options that could be appealing to some wouldn't be unpleasant to have.

## **Regarding the Courses Themselves**

Here, I will discuss some of the details of each course that is a part of *Pushing Understanding*. In brief, while all the courses have of elements of hands-on learning and critical thinking, *Forming a Corpus*, *Snake's Coils*, and *That's Just Cruel* are more oriented towards hands-on learning, while *Hypertexts and Digital Literature*, *Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts*, and *Forms of Narratives and the Narrative* focus more on critical thinking. Additionally, *Forming a Corpus* and *Forms of Narratives and the Narrative* are akin to broader surveys and are suited to the 200 level, while *Snakes's Coils* and *That's Just Cruel* emphasize active simulation, and *Hypertexts and Digital Literature* and *Analyzing Interactive Texts* resemble more specialized critical courses suited for the 300-level or honors seminar

## The Pseudo-Survey Courses

*Forming a Corpus*' first iteration was written significantly before *Pushing Understanding* was even beginning to take shape, but was later added to the project and adapted substantially to fit the project better. It focuses on what one might expect from the title – it provides students the opportunity to create an interdisciplinary corpus of works. In this course, students spend the semester amassing works from a variety of media and disciplines and organizing them into a collection for use in research, analysis, or other scholarly tasks. The emphasis on “forming” is in tune with *Pushing Understanding*'s boarder focus on self-guided learning. The course requires that students not only actively seek out and critically examine works, but they must do so in a way that connects those works to the others in their corpuses.

The course's projects are specifically designed to avoid making this a thankless exercise, while also making the course “outcome dependent” – that is, where the behavior of individual students affects what they get out of the course – in a meaningful manner. Essentially, each project is meant to either direct students to think about their self-made product and its practical usages or – and sometimes, *and* –challenge students to create, which is admittedly somewhat more geared towards the hand-on nature of *Pushing Understanding*. Finally, *Forming a Corpus*' syllabus' “explorative content,” emphasis on exploration, and curated collections of works can be seen across other syllabi in *Pushing Understanding*, although its “Consider, Explore, Read, Assignment,” or “CERA” element is mostly vestigial now, in that it hasn't formally made its way to other syllabi in the project beyond the inclusion of “Consider” questions for each week or unit.

*History of Narratives and the Narrative* has perhaps the most general and expansive focus of these six courses. It examines texts, narratives, and storytelling not only as pieces of work to be analyzed as they are, but also their status as anthropological touchstones and as flexible resources with multiple applications. The “narratives” the course examines extend beyond those in literature: movies, television, music, and visual art all play similar roles in this course as literature might in any other course. As noted earlier, *History of Narratives and the Narrative* features in-class opportunities for students to engage in science-course-like “labs,” which take the form of hands-on in-class activities such as writing collaboratively with others in the class, painting pictures, or attending a music concert as a class.

The reading load of *History of Narratives and the Narrative* is modest, and allows students to read texts in their entirety and to engage in robust in-class activities and written reflections. The course’s material is used quite exhaustively, with essentially no excerpting. Additionally, the in-class activities in question provide for no small amount of intellectual stimulation and material to cover. Furthermore, the course’s “biweekly upkeep,” including regular, not-insubstantial written reflections on in-class activities provides plenty of work for students and plenty of opportunities to reflect and analyze the course’s reading and experiences.

## The Seminar-Likes

*Hypertexts and Digital Literature*'s course material focuses on online and virtual texts, along with physical or traditional texts that share some similarities with such texts. For instance, parts of canonical and pre-digital texts, such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, are included as readings early in the course. Their presence emphasizes the way many printed texts now read like "proto-hypertexts" due to their complexity and particular use of outside reference. Topics such as Deleuzian rhizomatics (in the sense that hypertexts are "bodies without organs" and can often be started and stopped at points that aren't a true beginning or end) and participatory fan culture (in the sense that no small quantity digital literature, especially collaborative fiction and even more so fanfiction, is written out of passion) are discussed alongside the central, more exploratory focus of examining hypertexts and digital literature on a general level.

As one might expect from the title, *Hypertexts and Digital Literature* covers many websites and online projects – roughly as many as it does more traditional texts. It was also because of *Hypertexts and Digital Literature* that the project as a whole ended up shifting towards OER. Of course, *Pushing Understanding* isn't completely OER – it's closer to what's been called "OER-lite." However, *Hypertexts and Digital Literature*'s syllabus' inclusion of many free online resources as core course materials influenced the structure and components of the other syllabi in the project.

While *Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts* may at first glance seem rather redundant with *Hypertexts and Digital Literature*, and while indeed there is some overlap in course material between the two, the former has a much more specific focus. Rather than looking at

many types of digital literature, *Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts* very specifically examines just that – interactive texts. One noteworthy similarity between the two is that the latter looks at non-digital hypertexts, while the former looks at non-digital interactive texts, such as books from the *Choose Your Own Adventure* series. *Critically Analyzing Interactive Texts* is aimed at students interested in digital projects such as *Twine*, or internet-based video “augmented reality games” (or ARGs) such as *Petscop* or *PBhere*, which, while they were still in progress, watchers were able to influence the events in the ARG through commenting on its constituent videos.,

## The Simulations

*Snake's Coils: Underhanded Tactics in Art and Problem Solving* likely has the most obtuse and unorthodox syllabus out of any course in *Pushing Understanding*. It is a course that relies heavily on a somewhat-stilted form of immersion, and aims to play with “consecrated space” that is the classroom in relation to the world outside it. As previously stated, *Snake's Coils* is a simulation-based course, although in a fittingly-insidious manner: many of its meetings are grounded in lectures and class discussions, but outside of these, and outside of class, students are not only allowed, but actively encouraged and expected to use trickery, apply questionable methods, and even go against the conventions of academic integrity to complete their assignments, although not outside the bounds of the course. Even the syllabus of *Snake's Coils* has a sinister nature about it: requirements of obtaining 5% (the “Ambiguously-Obtained Credit”) of the course grade are rendered unknowable to students, several weekly assignments are left up to student interpretation (this is intentional), and some, including Week 1’s and Week 4’s, are specifically designed to be unable to be completed, even with underhanded tactics. In practice, due to Week 1’s assignment being due on the non-existent “Week 20,” and the actual goal of Week 4’s assignment is to showcase the ability of the instructor to be an “unreliable narrator,” rather than to have students complete it. In fact, two of the texts on the syllabus are controversial due to their possibly-plagiarized content: Bruno Bettelheim’s *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* and Austin Kleon’s *Steal Like an Artist: 10 Things Nobody Told You About Being Creative*.

Although *Snake's Coils* is a course on foul play and one that in fact actively encourages foul play, it relies very heavily on student integrity and willingness to “play along.” The “Honor between Thieves” extra-credit portion of the grade is meant to directly incentivize this. The goal

of the course isn't to teach students how to cheat better, but rather to teach them about cheating and other underhanded tactics. The rationale for the course's unusual specifications is to get students into the headspace of a cheater through the use of simulation and play. While this may seem frivolous, consider a student walking into or doing work for a history class: while the student likely isn't a historical figure, the student certainly does live through history simply by nature of being alive. A student in a science class is a scientist in at least some sense as long as they remain in the classroom or are doing homework, and a student in a math or literature class is a mathematician and a writer under the same circumstances. In a class where the subject being learned about is "cheating," it makes sense that students in the class are cheaters, at least to some extent within the bounds of the class.

A note on *Snake's Coils'* coursework: rather than having multiple large, high-stakes projects, the course's "Assignments" grade is primarily based on lower-stakes in-class exams and weekly homework that rely primarily on subjective responses, rather than on memorization. These exams contain elements such as intentional, exploitable typos, explicit-yet-subtle loopholes, and questions intentionally designed to have no predefined correct answer. In all of these cases, critically thinking about the course readings will certainly help students, although in the last case, simply stating or using facts and details from course material may not be sufficient, instead requiring a more prescriptive, creative, even playful approach. *Snake's Coils* homework assignments match these trends as well. For instance, Week 3's reading assignment is as follows: "choose any book with at least 500 pages that does not exist. Read that book." Students are then tasked with writing a five-page response on this non-existent book. On many levels, this assignment appears absolutely crass; however, although unusual and jarring, it's fully doable, especially within the bounds of the course. For example, one possible solution would be to write

the response about a book that the writer of the response imagines, complete with quotations from imaginary passages.

The syllabus that provided the strongest impetus for *Pushing Understanding* is oddly enough the one that was latest. *That's Just Cruel: Abuse, Fairness, and Respect in Analysis and Learning* is a simulation-based course in which roughly every other class meeting, students experience a fabricated lesson or activity that demonstrates some manner of gross miscarriage of educational responsibility: for instance, an exam on advanced calculus during which any student who would so much as cough would be dismissed early. The marks students received on this exam would not impact their grades – rather, students would be expected to critically reflect on the simulation, connecting it to course readings, personal experiences, and other exercises. These simulations would be preceded by an email or some other form of communication that would fill students in on some vague “out-of-simulation” rules, such as that the simulation for the week would take place in the classroom, but nothing regarding what it would involve. Of course, students would be made very aware of the course’s nature on the first day, and none of the course activities would bring any sort of physical harm upon students.

Similarly to how *Snake's Coils* teaches about trickery and cheating through encouraging students to trick and cheat, albeit under circumstances that ideally bind these behaviors to the course and its assignments, *That's Just Cruel* teaches about cruelty through students needing to suffer simulated cruelty. *That's Just Cruel* was written to be a half-semester course in part due to the fact that its nature makes it not only particularly intense, but also because the course grade is firmly grounded in writing assignments that reflect on the regular simulations that make the course so intense. To clarify, *That's Just Cruel* isn't intense in terms of academic rigor, but rather in a much more clearly familiar form of ilinx – the reason there's emphasis on making

sure students understand what they are getting into with this course is that especially for students that hold themselves to extremely high academic and behavioral standards, activities such as the simulated exam could be outright traumatizing. While trauma is absolutely a theme explored in the course, purposefully inflicting excessive trauma that breaches the course's simulations on students would not only be completely unethical, but it would defeat the purposes of the simulations in the first place.

## **Records, Access, and the Future**

*Pushing Understanding* is hosted on GitHub as a collection of documents, where it can be freely accessed by anyone wishing to view it or download it or any of its components. The extended syllabi that make it up are organized in folders, which contain main body of the syllabi along with any associated supplements. If *Pushing Understanding* needs to be removed from public access for some reason or another, there will be an attempt made to leave at least some manner of archived version of it accessible prior to its removal.

*Pushing Understanding* will continue to be updated in the future. These updates will primarily take the form of the additions of new syllabi and supplements for those syllabi, or revisions to previously-added syllabi. These new additions, in addition to revisions of the initial material, will be stored separately from the original initial material for archival purposes. I don't plan on aggressively advertising *Pushing Understanding*, but in order to get the word out about the project, I do plan to tell my colleagues who are interested in pedagogy and curriculum about it.

If I reach my goal of achieving a doctorate, I will almost certainly use at least some of the materials that are a part of *Pushing Understanding* for undergraduate classes I teach myself.

## Conclusion

*Pushing Understanding* is first and foremost meant to provide digital pedagogues with a robust, perhaps unorthodox educational resource. More implicitly, it seeks to not only challenge pedagogical and educational norms, but also to examine pedagogy and education through a new lens – a lens of play. While play has been observed even in species without society (that is, non-humans) since time immemorial, leisure as we know it today has only manifested relatively recently. *Pushing Understanding* isn't aimed to make education some sort of lighthearted game – rather, it aims to apply and use the primal element of play to augment what education already offers and perhaps counter some of its shortcomings.

In brief, *Pushing Understanding* is a request to rethink education as an end in itself, to recapture the notion of higher education as a “consecrated space” of sorts that learners are invited into for a however-many years so that they can explore their interests and form themselves as critical thinkers and active citizens, rather than as people going through the motions to get a degree. It's meant to be something of a foil to the intensification and ever-growing commodification of education.

On a personal level, to some degree, I admittedly had my work cut out for me with *Pushing Understanding*. My career at the moment consists of running *Dungeons and Dragons 5<sup>th</sup> Edition* with students ranging in age from 6-15: while this is much more explicitly a game than much of *Pushing Understanding*, many of the principles behind the classes I teach are also present in *Pushing Understanding*. To avoid disputes and to accommodate for players of varying levels of familiarity with the game, I try very hard to cut down on agon. *Dungeons and Dragons* relies heavily on dice rolls, and thus alea is unavoidable, but due to its equally-heavy reliance on

role play, mimicry is practically built in. The closest to emphasizing ilinx I come, however, is occasionally playing tension-increasing ambiance during in-game combat or other dangerous situations.

In the end though, *Pushing Understanding*, like many projects, is meant to be an exercise in enjoyment. To be clear, this isn't to say that I merely did the project out of self-indulgent passion. Rather, *Pushing Understanding*'s often-unusual subject matter lends itself to those with a variety of interests and passions, ranging from broad and mainstream to specific and niche. With a project with play as one of its core components, to not factor fun into the formula would not have been an intelligent decision at all.

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