

Re-Thinking History Teaching: Historical Making and Learning in Digital Culture

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INTRODUCTION

How can digital games be used effectively in historical education? For decades there has been a call for educators to explore new possibilities for meeting goals defined broadly under a growing number of ‘twenty-first century competencies’ curricula. These stress the need for students to combine critical skills with an understanding of the processes and reach of technologies in daily life, in order to prepare them for a shifting cultural and economic landscape. In answer, an extensive literature has grown up about game-based learning (Prensky 2001; Gee 2003; Squire 2004; 2011; Steinkuehler, Squire, Barab 2012; Jenson, Taylor, De Castell 2011; Jenson et al. 2016). History as a discipline lends itself particularly well to game-based learning; it is bound up in questions of interpretation, agency, and choice, considerations that game design as a process highlights well. Historical games provide unique opportunities not simply to view or experience history narratively and aesthetically, but to *participate in it*. Most importantly, the intervention of player into the represented past of the game has the effect of highlighting the contingency of decisions that shape outcomes, a principle that is often left unclear or purposefully obfuscated in textbook driven history learning. My research plumbs the potential uses of digital historical games in history education. This paper presents preliminary findings from my ongoing participant-based research study that takes the form of an interactive digital history course. In it, students, working in small groups, are tasked with creating their own original historical game. Data consists primarily of the game object that students design, voluntary sit-down interviews, and a **critical reflection document** that all students are responsible for completing as part of the final project for the course. This document asks the student to describe how they undertook the project, the kinds of questions they asked and those that were raised over the course of the work, and their takeaways from completing the work. Coursework is designed in such a way that the student will build a toolkit and confidence that is meant to assist them in working towards their final project. Thus, students in this course do not merely produce a final project that is chosen and produced at their own discretion, they tailor their coursework and in-class work to scaffold this larger assignment. Students are introduced to a variety of digital historical content that is meant to provide a foundation for their thinking (and their work). This content is framed around five central questions: 1) what constitutes legitimate history in a digital society, and how can we know? 2) how can we approach a critical analysis of the process of history making both in its traditional and digital forms? 3) how are authorship, content creation, and user engagement with digital history defined and policed? 4) what does the profusion of popular historical representations in digital media mean for the future of academic history? 5) what represents best practices for the teaching of history in

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a digital world? **The purpose of this project is not that students become expert coders or designers. Rather, it is to get them to think about the work they do from a multimodal perspective that reflects better the shifting nature of historical production and consumption in a digital world.** Viewed this way, students ideally come to see history as a process that involves both content and design in its implementation, and they are forced to grapple with some of the pressures which face public and academic history in its attempt to account for the sheer volume of ‘historical stuff’ that exists for public consumption. In addition, placing students in this context and asking them to take the lead on designing their own original and interactive historical experiences in the form of a game provides them with an opportunity to think about how systems, design (choices), affordances and constraints contribute to historical making more broadly. For the student, this can raise critical questions regarding the relationship between learning, curriculum and play. This echoes a shift in educational research towards a kind of ‘learning 2.0’ (Downes, 2005; Lankshear & Knobel 2002; Seely-Brown & Addler, 2008) wherein educators and researchers have applauded the capacity for digital tools (like interactive blogs, wikis, and games) to transform learners from passive recipients of knowledge into active participants in their learning. The data collected from this research is aimed at providing insight into two major questions that occupy researchers and educators working in history. First, how can we best incorporate digital content into history education? (what questions are most important to ask about this content, and how do we seek answers?), And second, regarding digital historical games, what represents best practices for deploying these games in educational settings? Data analysis for this project remains underway and future academic productions related to the research are forthcoming.

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