From Candy Crush to Catan: One Student's Perspective on the Benefits of Gaming in Academia

Morgan Ebbs
Pittsburg State University

In the spring semester of 2015, I, a fresh-faced sophomore in college, made the bold decision to take a class called, "The Rhetoric of Gaming." Having only really played games during my childhood, this choice was perhaps a bit naïve of me. I'm not ashamed to admit that I was the definition of what some like to refer to as a "casual," "plebe," or even "newb," depending upon the decade in which you spent your teen years. In fact, I was even below that. I truly had absolutely no business being in that classroom. I was a hater, actively dismissive of gaming and the surrounding culture as a whole. Not only did I feel like games were solely for entertainment, but I also thought that, even as modes of entertainment, gaming ultimately had little to no value. Even worse still, gaming, in my mind, was a boy's club in the most detestable way imaginable. When I imagined gamers, I saw horrifying scenes of men hurling violent, sexist insults at one another over Xbox live. Even though I typically think of myself as an open-minded person, everything I knew of gaming and gamers was based completely on harmful stereotypes. Putting all this aside, when you consider that my peak gaming experience occurred when Kim Kardashian: Hollywood was released, it was abundantly clear that I had a deficit from the moment I walked into the classroom. I had absolutely no idea what to expect and no way to relate to my peers regarding gaming. When they spoke of FPSs and MMOs, I responded with WTFs and IDKs. Considering all of this, enrolling in the Gaming class was probably one of the

most foolish decisions I've made during my academic career. However, much to my surprise, it also became one of the most rewarding ones as well.

When I took my seat on that first day of class, the first thing I did was curse myself for my stupid decision. Looking around and gawking at my fellow students in horror, my suspicions were being confirmed right before my very eyes: every preconceived notion I had about gaming was absolutely, undeniably true. Every negative gamer stereotype must have been seated in that classroom. As I stared in disgust at the almost 30 year-old male in front of me while he chugged his bottle of Mountain Dew like it was his life force and shoved fistfuls of nacho cheese Doritos into his gaping maw, I knew I had made a dire mistake. Always one for dramatics, I leaned over to my neighbor and declared, "This classroom is literally all 9 circles of my personal Hell." Nightmares of socially-inept, unkempt, Gamergate bros danced through my head as I imagined what was to come for the rest of the semester. I, as the bra-burning Feminist I am, pictured myself in heated exchanges over whether or not Ubisoft was sexist and shuttered. What had I gotten myself into? Would I even survive this semester without giving myself an ulcer? Or a felony? As I weighed the pros and cons of dropping the class, the professor walked in and I decided to table the discussion for a later date. But, as a listened to the professor that first day, hanging off of every word, I knew that later date would never come. All it took was once class period—Syllabus Day, at that—to convince me that the gamified classroom was an infinitely unique, innovative, and effective alternative to the traditional classroom. Even if I couldn't resolve my distaste for gaming, I quickly understood that this experience was one I would regret missing if I chose to drop. So I didn't.

On Syllabus Day, as the professor detailed what was in store for us that semester and explained the interworkings of our gamified classroom, I felt absolutely mesmerized by this totally ingenious way of designing a classroom experience. Instead of traditional grades, we received XP (experience points) for assignments. We went on "Quests" and wrote about our experiences, which essentially involved taking field notes during game nights at the professor's house. Rather than using our actual names and likenesses, we created and named individual avatars with personalized strengths and abilities, which were eventually used to assign us to certain classes (think Dungeon & Dragons) in group projects. In an obvious display of my creativity, I dubbed my avatar "Morrigan." As a Professional Writing and Literature major at my university, I naturally created an avatar that used words as their tool. Lastly, in perhaps one of the most alluring benefits of the gamified classroom, was the leader board. Each time grades were put in, we would go up on the leader board, competing for that coveted first place spot. As an incredibly competitive person, this idea was the most exciting of them all for me. Flash-forwarding to May, I imagined my name displayed in the number 1 position and saw myself beaming with the satisfaction of knowing I won the class. Now, rest easy, FERPA—our identities were kept anonymous by secretly assigning us cartoon characters to represent ourselves on the board. This was a minor concern, however, because identifying who was in first place did not matter: everyone who was not in first place knew it wasn't them and that was satisfying enough. As I was reeling from the amazingness that was this class, I was also absolutely mesmerized by the implications of designing a classroom in this manner. Here was the perfect way of intrinsically motivating students to be more productive and to create better work. After all, who wants to lose a game? Not only that, but it was also designed to play on the student's

strengths, which, in turn, further encouraged more productivity with better results. The individualized nature of the classroom was even more important because it emphasized collaboration on the final project—designing your own board game.

Honestly, when our professor told us that we were going to be designing and actually creating our own board games, I was apprehensive. To me, this seemed like the sort of project that people spent years working on with experienced professionals, not weeks with a group of rookie students. As someone who had never even fathomed creating a board game for obvious reasons, I did not have the slightest idea as to what kind of game I would want to create. This was even harder still when our professor informed us that we would be creating persuasive games, which meant that our games would need to use Ian Bogost's theory of procedural rhetoric—or, the "practice of using processes persuasively" (Bogost, 3)—to make an argument that uses the gaming process to further assert our claim. Although his idea seems relatively simple now, this was perhaps the most difficult part of the class for many students. Why was procedural rhetoric almost exclusively limited to play? Why did he consider some forms of play more procedural than others? Although this is grossly oversimplifying Bogost's theory, the level of procedurality depend on the level of vividness that the process offered. According to Bogost, games are one of the most vivid experiences one can have, short of lived experience. For those of us who did not play games, this idea was difficult to grapple with. Even further, as previously mentioned I am an English major twice over, so words have always been king to me. Now, some random gamer was here to tell me that his precious video games were somehow better than my words? I could not, would not, understand how a video game could be able to teach ideas more effectively than quite literally spelling it out on paper could. I realize now how irrational this line

of thinking was but, at the time, I was not having any of it. I fought hard against his line of thinking for weeks until I had my eventual "come to Jesus" moment where the lightbulb clicked, the clouds parted, and everything finally made sense. After the grueling few weeks of my professor hammering Bogost into my brain, I was finally prepared to implement my ideas into a game.

As a part of the game-creating process, each student was tasked with proposing their own persuasive game and then presenting their idea to the class. After everyone presented, we would then vote for our favorites and the final three would move on to prototyping. While I was sure my game, a Clue-meets-Mafia-meets-Guess Who? 1950s-nuclear-family-themed game about identity politics, would be Hasbro's next big thing, I was sadly bested by the work of genius entitled Escape from Silverton. Perhaps the most well-conceived game of the entire class, this game put players in a position of a person living in a low-income, high-crime city called Silverton. The goal of the game was simple: escape from Silverton by moving to a neighboring city. To do so, players needed to earn $2,000 by choosing either the Civilian or Criminal paths. The Civilian path, while low-risk, involved getting a regular job and slowly earning income. The Criminal path, however, had large payoffs for doing risky, nefarious activities. However, after too many negative Criminal activities, a player's Reputation would drop to zero. Once they reached this point, there was no redemption. Much like actual Criminals, they were forced to take the Criminal path for the rest of the game and hope it played out in their favor. The message of this game was simple, but powerful: sometimes good people are forced to do so-called bad things in order to survive and that, when we stigmatize these people for doing those things, we only exacerbate the cycle. Thinking back to Bogost and procedural rhetoric, this game was proof

that gaming as a whole has the power to enact potentially significant long-term social change. By asking players to make the choice of Civilian or Criminal, and then forcing them to live with the negative consequences of their choices, the game exposed players to the realities of life of a person in a low-income, high-crime area in an efficacious manner. I distinctly recall watching this student give his proposal in class, captivated by the idea that a simple board game was able to communicate such a significant message in a creative, engaging, and, most importantly, effective way. As dismayed as I was by not winning the vote (mostly because I missed out on the bonus XP), I knew right then that this student's game was the one I wanted to work on. The next step was to make it happen.

As luck would have it, when our professor divided us into groups based on the roles he assigned us earlier in the semester, I was placed in the Escape from Silverton group. Now, as most students will tell you, group projects suck for a variety of reasons. One, maybe two, people always end up doing the work of six people, everyone receives the same grade even though one person never came to a meeting or responded to any emails, and someone always does something wrong at the last minute, forcing someone else to stay up until 4:00 AM to cover their mistakes, all while fueled by junk food, caffeine, and sheer hatred. In short, group projects are the bane of most college student's existence. But, even luckier still, our group was perfection. There was a great balance of roles, everyone got on well enough, and we were all extremely excited about the project. Everyone already had a job based on their avatar's assigned class, so we were all doing something we not only excelled at, but also enjoyed doing. Unfortunately for the other two groups, ours was the only group who had someone from every class, so they had some balance issues. However, it did speak to the level of collaboration needed in the groups, which was

arguably one of the most valuable takeaways of the class. While everyone in our group was extremely well-suited for their role and able to work mostly independently, because of the size and nature of this project, it was absolutely necessary for us to come together and find a cohesive end goal. Although it came from one person's idea, none of us had ever been challenged in this way before. There was no way for one person to do a project of that size in just shy of two months, so it was up to all six members of our group members to come together and bring their ideas to life. In the other groups, where they were not as strong in every area, collaboration was even more important. For difficult tasks, it took the effort of every member to make sure they were able to adapt and make the project work for them. Flexibility, combined with the right level of collaboration for each group, was essential to all three projects.

When it came to actually producing the game, because the student who proposed Escape from Silverton had done such a great job of conceptualizing the game, we were able to start creating content immediately. However, our group was still extremely rigorous. About every week, our project manager assigned a number of cards to write would meet to sort through the ones we thought were the best. One of the biggest challenges of our game was trying to find a proper balance between funny and offensive content. Considering the nature of our game, we wanted to cards to show a lighter side to the game in order to reach a wider audience. But, it was also really easy for certain group members to buy into negative stereotypes when writing their cards. Every card was reviewed on an individual basis to make sure the jokes a) did not offend anyone and b) did not fall flat. We spent hours trying to make our cards politically correct, but not so much so that they were prudish and I'm still not sure if we accomplished that goal. We also needed to conceptualize our packaging graphics, game components, design of the game

components, design and layout of the rules, and content of the rules. As mentioned earlier, we had 140 cards in our game. However, we also had 12 dials that were used to keep track of player's in-game stats, the rulebook, and three die. We had to figure the size of all of our components and how they would fit into a box in order to make sure we bought the proper size. We also spent a great deal of time focusing on the visual rhetoric of the game. From the symbols and colors—a red gun for criminals, a yellow person-shaped figure for civilians, and a blue star, or badge, for heroes—to the bright red, dripping (think blood and/or graffiti) fonts on the dismal, grey, brick background, we wanted our game to be extremely evocative of our emotions regarding the subject matter. In our minds, by representing the Civilians as the only humanoid figures of the game, we were really speaking to the demonization of the Criminals and the idolization of so-called Heroes.

As the massive amount of detail in the previous paragraph displays, making a game is a massive amount of work. I personally had never taken on a project of that scale before and I am sure the majority of my group hadn't either. Not only did simply conceptualizing our game take weeks, production took even more of our time. While the artist of our group slaved away over Adobe Illustrator, the rest of us wrote cards like we were transcribing messages from God. Any time I had an idea for a card, I would stop everything I was doing, whether I was eating lunch, on my way to class, at work, etc., and make a note in my phone so I could refer back to it later. We not only spend hours each week working on the game individually, we also met almost every week for multiple hours in and outside of class to continue working. Nothing made it into the game unless it was reviewed by the majority of the group. As I previously mentioned, collaboration was not only absolutely essential to creating our project, we were all doing it in a

way we had really never done before this class. Although I am still but a student, if I know anything of the working world—particularly the humanities—it is that you will often find yourself collaborating with multiple people at once. With the exceptions of my prior disappointments, also known as group projects, I had always relied solely on myself to accomplish my academic goals. Moreover, creating the game also forced us to step outside of our comfort zones and challenge ourselves in ways we hadn't previously encountered. Our group was made up of three Professional Writing majors, one Web Design major, one Justice Studies major, and one Public Relations major. None of us, at least until the point, were tasked with being so highly creative inside of the classroom. Not only we were forced to think of rhetoric in new and often challenging ways—thanks, Ian Bogost—we also had to become masters of organization, time management, storytelling, critical thinking, written communication, product development, advertising—you get the idea. Our group was so successful at this that, although this has not come to fruition as of today, we had professors express interest in using our game as a teaching tool.

Speaking of using games as a teaching tool, I, and others from my Gaming group, were so enthralled by the experience of designing our own board game that we decided to do it again the following fall semester…and again the semester after that. The second game I worked on was a zombie apocalypse themed game called Code or Die that taught players the basics of building HTML code with CSS. The most recent game I helped create, Scare Solutions, was a monster-meets-business themed game that answered the question, "What do Professional Writers do?" As an internship with the Director of the Professional Writing program at my University, I, and another student from the Gaming class, designed this game to coincide with the revamping of our

university's Professional Writing program. In the hopes of using the game as a way to recruit high school English students, we designed the game to not only show the alternatives that students have to typical Literature, Education, or Creative Writing degrees, but also to display the variety of careers and opportunities that come with a degree like Professional Writing. In fact, we were so pleased with this game that we eventually chose to submit it to our university's annual Research Colloquium where, although we did not win, we had many professors and prospective teachers express interest in not only our game, but using games as teaching methods in general. They were deeply interested in our theory—thanks again, Ian Bogost—and, like us, saw the unique value that games can offer to learning experiences, whether it involves gamifying your classroom, creating games as class projects, or using games to teach students specific material. Because of these very reasons, games have not only been a continual, enriching part of my academic experience, I will utilize the skills that I acquired through game design in my future professional endeavors. Before I experienced firsthand how effective gaming is in and out of the classroom, I never understood the value or potential that games offered to those who play them. Reflecting on that first day of "The Rhetoric of Gaming," I am almost alarmed to see how drastically one's perspective can evolve in the matter of a year. Rather than dread spending a night in the company of my peers, I began to look forward to our class game nights, adding the most interesting ones we played to my Amazon wishlist in hopes my partner would take the hint. I even managed to stop fighting Bogost and finally not only accept, but also understand and appreciate, his theory of procedural rhetoric. At the time, I wasn't ready to admit what I had become: that is, a bona fide gamer. However, although Kim K and I may be on a break, my passion for gaming has only flourished in the past year, primarily due to the numerous collegiate

and academic benefits I've received from gaming. Newb no more, this hater-turned-gamer now preaches of the benefits gaming has to offer the world of academia. I am not only a better student because of gaming, I am a more innovative creator and more valuable team member. Regardless of whether you are a student or an educator, gaming has advantages for all levels of academia. As someone who just a short year ago held a strong bias against games and gaming culture, my radical change of heart is a true testament to the validity of gaming's place in academia.

Works Cited

Bogost, Ian. Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. Print.