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Modding the Humanities: Experiments in Historic Narratives

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If you do not like the past, change it. ~ William L. Burton

While the ludology versus narratology debate raged within game studies circles [1], game designers continued building games and developing methods to improve player experience. Today however, while designers may have their personal preferences, there is no longer any doubt that both mechanics and story can have an important role to play in a game [2,3, 4, 5, 6, 7]. The question now more directly addresses design concerns specific to games, the goals of the designer[3, 8] and the type of experience they are attempting to create. Games available today can run the gamut from the traditional game to what would best be described as interactive narratives. Purely interactive narrative games like *Dear Esther*, *Thirty Flights of Lovin* and *Analog a Hate Story* use different techniques that incorporate game mechanics, environment and interactivity to tell a story. A parallel trend, evident in the casual game sector, is the increased incorporation of narratives into mechanic based games. *Candy Crush*, for example, adds a limited narrative to its “match-3” mechanic. The Jewel Quest series has experimented

with a variety of narrative approaches and now, with *Jewel Quest: The Sapphire Dragon*, incorporates a complete story to frame the game play. “*But the games which have really set the bar of late are the BioShocks, the Grand Theft Autos, the Fallouts, the Elder Scrolls – titles which have reversed the status quo by making gameplay serve narrative, and been all the more impressive for it.*” [4]

Although it is generally recognized that stories have a way of connecting people, creating empathy and emotional attachment, it is not well understood how games might best leverage narrative components. While this is an important matter within commercial games, it is a far more critical issue with regards to educational history and museum games. Museum artifacts and historic events have always been understood through the construction of narrative. However, these narratives have always been linear and do not directly translate into the nonlinear space of game narratives. In order to better understand how historic narratives can better map to game play, this

study reviews two mods made for the Elderscrolls series, *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*.

Some commercial game companies have made it easy to experiment with game-making by creating toolkits that allow anyone to build mods (modules or modifications) that “plug in” to the commercial game so that new, player created content may be added into the commercial game structure. Modding allows low to no cost experimentation with gameplay, quests and narratives. The Elderscrolls games, *Oblivion* and *Skyrim*, are large role playing games (RPG) with an open, sandbox style of gameplay which is ideal for narrative experimentation. [9] While modding is used extensively for player generated content, it has not been widely adopted for history based games, notwithstanding some notable exceptions such as MIT’s *Revolution* [10,11]. Another example is a NEH funded mod to *Civilization IV* titled *Red Land/Black Land*. This mod allows players to explore both the “process of socio-historical change within the framework of ancient Egypt,” and “the construction of historical and archaeological knowledge.” [12] [13] *Civilization IV* is a turn-based strategy game in which the player grows cities and nations by exploiting resources and conquest. The *Civilization* and *Elderscroll* series focus on different elements to create diverse game experiences: *Elderscrolls* privileges narrative and exploration while *Civilization* games focus on strategy and resource management. Although these two examples have different goals and mechanics, they are still heavily reliant upon engaging the player, and are both part of the repertoire of common player experience. The question of player experience has been largely ignored in the design of educational history games. Instead, the entire focus has been mainly on educational objectives and, in museums, “time spent looking at object.” Educational objectives are, in educational games, very important but they must be balanced with player experience, mechanics and

other elements of the game.

Games may be thought of as the interplay of three core components: formal elements, dramatic elements and the player. The formal elements are usually represented by the mechanics. Art and narrative make up the dramatic and the player makes choices about what can happen in the game. However, games emphasize these elements differently depending on the desired outcome.[7] Some games emphasize the role of the player, like *Minecraft*. Other games focus purely on mechanics, such as *Bejewelled* or *Tetris*. In some cases, the game can emphasize the dramatic elements such as narrative driven games like *Indigo Prophecy*. In order to be successful, games with an educational component must match gameplay to educational goals by choosing to emphasize formal or dramatic elements. If the intent of the game is to help players learn about dates, locations, events or logistics, then it makes sense to weight the mechanics, or formal elements. On the other hand, if the intent is to connect players to social history or lives of everyday citizens, then a narrative based game would seem the better option. However, the conventional advice for making history games is to stay away from narrative and find some game-like process within the subject matter [14,15]. This is a good approach if the game’s educational goals align with the abstraction necessary to reduce the historical situation to a mechanic but is a poor fit for games desiring to connect emotionally with the player. Whether choosing a commercial game to mod, or developing a game from scratch, designers of history games should balance game elements with educational goals. For example, *Civilization IV* is a simulation/strategy game that supports educational goals that focus on process or modeled systems. The *Elderscrolls*, on the other hand, supports immersion in a world, dialogue driven quests and creating emotional responses suitable for biographies and social histories.

When designing a history game, there must be a clear understanding of what the player should walk away with, educationally speaking. Is it facts and dates? Or is it immersing players in an experience? Traditionally, history has been viewed from a distance, as something from, well, the past. Video games have the potential of allowing players to experience the past directly if they can be emotionally or intellectually connected to the content. It can allow them to interpret evidence and assess it critically. This fits in well with the current understanding of history as an act of interpretation. *“Each age tries to form its own conception of the past. Each age writes the history of the past anew with reference to the conditions uppermost in its own time.”* [16] History is about making meaning from the evidence left behind. Of making sense from artifacts: diaries, ledgers, notecards, paintings, furniture and houses. These objects are the history through which an historic interpretation, or narrative is constructed. Game designers can allow players to make meaning from historic events and objects in different ways: up-close and personal or distanced and abstracted.

Mod One: Oblitus Artium, Elderscrolls IV: Oblivion

Funded by the National Center for Preservation Training and Technology, *Oblitus Artium* is a large mod that encompasses about 5-6 hours of game play targeted towards young adults, college age and older. The overall purpose of the project was to develop a game about art conservation and art conservation science both for outreach and use in the college classroom. Art conservation/science is a field that is focused, very specifically, on the material object. One of the key design issues was to broaden the understanding, or definition, of the object. In many museum-based games that are object oriented, the educational focus is on visual interpretation or facts

related to the artifact. In reality, the artifact is the surviving tangible evidence of an intangible past. The goal in this case was to teach the analysis and preservation of cultural heritage within the context of the immaterial aspects in order to better engage the player with the educational material.[17] In order to do this, the design team created two types of narrative approaches to evaluate which would be most successful in creating engagement with the material: 1.) whimsical non-related narratives and 2.) the adaptation of existing, historic linear narratives.

The educational goals of this mod focus on raising awareness of art conservation and art history, presenting scientific content in a non-traditional way and to teach conservation content, like the deterioration of materials and pigment analysis. The role of the narrative, therefore, was to engage the player and to make the science seem approachable. The idea behind the embedded narratives was to take a lab scenario a step further than a simulation in order to make the content more meaningful to the player.

The first step was to create a new island within the game world that housed a Conservation Guild. The island also was the location for a museum from which the player would work. The museum includes a laboratory and a library for the player to use (*see Figure 1*) for the five main quests that tackle a number of different conservation related tasks: Tutorial, Caring for your Collection, Analyzing Materials, The Archimedes Quest, and Looting/Ethics. The mod is designed to support classroom use and so the quests are modular and most may be accessed individually. Currently, two of the main quest series have been evaluated in class and by smaller focus groups. Each of these quests uses slightly different narrative strategies in an effort to evaluate how well they address the overall goal of player engagement.

Strategy 1: Incorporating unrelated but amusing narrative with a challenging task.

Caring for Your Collection is a quest which requires the player to identify material deterioration and understand environmental monitoring. In this quest, content was embedded in a virtual version of a multiple choice quiz which was preceded by a fun, narrative wrapper. The task, sorting out the materials, is somewhat dry so a fantasy narrative was developed to make the task more palatable in what is derogatively known as the “chocolate covered broccoli” approach. The first half of the quest has the player travel the virtual world to fight bandits in a cave to retrieve some missing books needed for research and to put a stop to the nocturnal antics of a supernatural spirit that was wreaking havoc in the collections. It was the “spirit” that disorganized the collection thus giving the player a reason to sort it out later.

After subduing the spirit, the player progresses on to the educational part of the game in which they have to re-organize all the materials. Players must research real National Park Service *Conserv-o-gram* literature in the library to learn how to identify different materials through the clues left by their deterioration. They then must sort the materials properly by placing them in the correct storage areas by figuring out the text clues associated with each object.

The quest sends the player on an initial fetch quest that takes them to the coastal town of Anvil, then to caves and then back to the island for the remainder of the game. Once back on the island, the player must use the museum library to research and learn about materials. They then have to apply this material to identify and sort the materials in what is a basic matching mechanism. There was little direct educational guidance for the player within this quest in order to assess the impact of unguided virtual research on learning. Players had to find the

right book for information and place the object in the correct drawer all on their own. Players reported being confused and wanted more support when engaging in the matching/sorting portion of the quest. Players also did not like the fantasy portion of the quest, preferring instead to get right to the educational component (see *Figure 2*). Some student comments on this quest:

“Please remove the spirit sidequest. It was not easy to get through and it added extra tedium to an otherwise simple and educational task.”

“I was very frustrated with the quest. It was difficult to find any information and there wasn’t any feedback telling if you were doing things correctly. There wasn’t anything that really interested me...”



Figure 1: Clip of the Oblitus Artium library [Watch](#)

From a design standpoint, there is clearly a lack of integration between the text books and the game play and it is clear that the players need additional feedback and support when playing through the educational component. Additionally, the students overall did not enjoy the added narrative. To be honest, it was a quickly thought out narrative ploy and not a well-

developed story. There was no emotional content, it was simply built to be functional, to contextualize a quest that gave the player more “fun” things to do. This approach did not fool the players who clearly regarded it as busy work. This section of the game is now being redesigned so that the player is better supported in the educational task by improving quest clues and extra notes in the library.

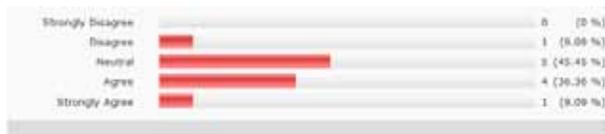


Figure 2: Class response to the question, “I think that organizing the collection activities would have been fun without having to find the journals and get rid of the spirit.” Note that this was tested on a group of over 20 but only 11 completed surveys. However, comments may be from the larger group interviews in the class room.

Strategy 2: Incorporate historic objects into a historically correct mythology to help create meaning for scientific analysis and pigment history.

The Pigment Analysis Quest (also known as Nefertari’s quest) focuses on teaching players how to identify pigments with polarized light microscopy and instrumental analysis. In order to increase engagement and to contextualize the task, the player was sent to a newly discovered Egyptian tomb based on the real tomb of Nefertari in the Valley of the Queens (see Figure 3). Before the player can take samples of the pigments to analyze, they must first “open” the tomb chamber by chamber. The game play requires that the player virtually re-enact the ordeals faced by Nefertari herself as her soul traverses the underworld depicted on the tomb wall paintings. Only then can the player take samples and return to the lab to learn to analyze them. This quest requires that the player study excerpts from

the *Book of the Dead* and learn the rules of Senet in the museum library in order to open the tomb. The player has to figure out how to gain entrance into the afterlife in the Nefertari tomb on their own with the books from the library. However, once they get the pigments to the lab, they are walked through a pigment identification tutorial designed as a set of small quests by one of the lab NPCs.



Figure 3: Inside Nefertari’s tomb [Watch](#)

Student comments and observations clearly showed that the Nefertari quest was a better fit to the educational goals. Students found the historic/real tomb content more interesting than the supernatural adventure. However, the amount of text used, although an excerpt, still amounted to a very large number of pages that the students found daunting to use. Students suggested organizing the text better and breaking into smaller chunks that would be more easily read in game. The Nefertari quest was play tested on a small focus group of science and computing students who were given a pop quiz after they had finished. 3 out of 4 students were able to correctly define specific terminology like the Becke line test and isotropism. In addition, these students responded that they felt this would be a good way to teach science to non-science majors (see Figure 6) and to raise awareness

of art conservation and art history (see Figure 4).

The design of this quest better integrated text components into gameplay and gave players a lot of support during the pigment analysis section. This clearly made a difference in player learning as no one reported being lost or confused. Players evaluated the level of “fun” for this game as a little more than moderate (see Figure 5). In addition, the story itself is much better: Strategy 1 used a flimsy story element of a troublesome spirit or demon but Strategy 2 included the full force of ancient Egyptian religion and lore. The journey of the dead through the underworld to the afterlife is a classic hero’s journey which mapped easily to *Elderscrolls* existing quest structure.

On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being ineffective and 5 being very effective, do you think this is a good way to raise awareness of art conservation and art history?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Average Rating
(no label)	0% 0	0% 0	25% 1	75% 3	0% 0	4	3.75

Figure 4:

On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being not fun and 5 being very fun, how fun was the game for you?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Average Rating
(no label)	25% 1	0% 0	25% 1	25% 1	25% 1	4	3.25

Figure 5:

On a scale of 1 to 5, 1 being a bad way and 5 being a very good way, do you think this is an effective way to interest non-science majors in science?

Answered: 4 Skipped: 0

	1	2	3	4	5	Total	Average Rating
(no label)	0% 0	0% 0	25% 1	25% 1	50% 2	4	4.25

Figure 6:

Mod 2: Hysteria!

Hysteria! Is a mod built in *Oblivion V: Skyrim* in order to explore the transmediation of the 19th century short story, *The Yellow Wall-Paper* by Charlotte Perkins Gilman [18], into gameplay. [19] Because this mod began from a very specific narrative, it was initially much more challenging to design into a game. The first step was to smash the original narrative into basic core components which could then be reassembled into the different game play elements: art, narrative (including dialogue and texts), player agency and mechanics. In order to do this, a close reading of the narrative had to be undertaken to analyze the story itself. In addition, the historical context of the work was brought in through the inclusion of relevant texts as clues and in library books needed to unlock quest stages. Although initially daunting, beginning with such a strong narrative actually improved the emotional quality of the game play. The Masterpiece Theater version of the *Yellow Wall-Paper* was also viewed when “translating” the game from the original narrative. The filmic version followed the written story fairly faithfully which would not do for a game. In the film, as in the book, the protagonist spends a lot of time looking at the wallpaper which would make for pretty boring game play. In order to understand the wallpaper as something that could be used in a game, its meaning in the story had to be unraveled first. The wallpaper clearly referenced domesticity,

feminine duty ca. late 19th century and good taste, or lack thereof. The pattern on the wallpaper symbolized entrapment and echoed the barred windows of the bedroom. Clearly, this story is emotional and rather than recreate a linear narrative, it was necessary to focus on creating an emotional experience in the player parallel to that of the story protagonist.

Then, there was the issue of player agency. In the story, the protagonist has no agency because she is forced to bed rest and, not only does she lack control of her own life, but also any sort of physical freedom. Player agency is often touted as the gold standard of games, good games give players agency. One of the reasons that some designers push against linear narratives is that players must, by definition, be deprived of agency as they are forced into a predefined ending. However, an examination of most adventure, and leading commercial FPS and RPG game releases shows that very rarely do players have true agency with the game outcome. Rather, they have some degree of freedom which refers, not to control over the direction of the plot line or story arc, but to the type and frequency of choices available. In fact, it is freedom, rather than true agency, that is essential for player engagement. [20] With this understanding of game interactivity, the decision was made to constrict the player and to mimic powerlessness by trapping them in the confines of a house. The horror of the story was recreated into the game, not by a woman peering out of the wallpaper but by the creation of a second character, a shadow of the player character who the player first thinks of as an ally (see Figure 7). Over time, as the shadow character appears more often, sometimes out of thin air, the player begins to question the nature of the character, and themselves. The overall educational goal, affective rather than cognitive, was to immerse players in an emotional journey that would connect them with the lot of 19th century women beginning with initial puzzlement,

to shock, loss of identity and then increasingly, desperation to escape.

As a means of emphasizing the powerlessness of the character, the player is stripped of all possessions and is referred to by every NPC as Mrs. Gilman; they refuse to acknowledge the player for who they really are. Results from a small focus group show that players clearly felt the shock value from the suddenly appearing Charlotte to the forced identity:

“I liked the shock of having nothing and suddenly being someplace where everyone was positive that I was someone I was not (even while the person who I think they were supposed to be accusing me of being was a different race - I am Khajiit so it was a little comical to me). Also the subtle accusation of me being possibly insane because of this, and the mental hospital fact, were pretty cool.”



Figure 7: *Hysteria!* clip of mod beginning and first encounter with Charlotte [Watch](#)

Player freedom and game play were introduced by sending the player on a series of quests to try to escape the house. Hidden triggers were set up around the house that would infect the player with a life draining illness which could only be stopped by drinking a patent medicine elixir. Results of the

focus group showed that this mechanic was intense as players focused on their rapidly draining health in a panic, resulting in the need for several replays to learn the layout of the triggers and the strategy for survival and completing the quest (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Clip from *Hysteria!* mod showing quests and melancholia infection [Watch](#)

In order to connect the short story to the history of the time, the mod incorporated a number of historic texts and references. Excerpts from texts that influenced Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the treatment described in the story, such as *Fat and Blood* [21], as well as documents on 19th century women's rights, bullock's blood, and patent medicine.

Conclusion

When reviewing these mods, it was clear that an analysis of the narrative content closely aligned with the results of the focus groups. The spirit story, from the Getting to know your Collection quest was something that was quickly thrown together and the disconnect between the narrative and the educational goals is clear in retrospect. However, lessons learned while building the spirit quest, even prior to testing, meant that the next narratives constructed, such as Nefertari's quest, improved. As an exercise, building a mod from an existing story such as the yellow

Wall-Paper helped show how emotional aspects of narrative might be brought into to the gameplay. It is undeniable that Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote a powerful story and, although more challenging initially, beginning with a great story that had emotional depth allowed the design of a deeper experience. Although the results are early and should be viewed with caution, the way the mods resonated differently with the players unmistakably points to the power of narrative. Clearly, there is a role for good storytelling in educational history games but much research needs to be done to develop strong design practices. Modding allows a fast and inexpensive way to study the balance between mechanics and narrative so that history may speak and inspire in this new medium.

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