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This is (not) a Game: The Adjunct Experience as Playable Fiction

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Abstract

How can a never-ending running 8-bit game be a piece of protest art? In examining her own experience in a related netprov protesting the treatment of adjuncts, the artist explores issues of agency, exploitation, and the very nature of games and playing in her artist's statement on her game, Adjunct Run: https://adjunctrun.readywriting.org/.

Essay

In July 2014, I attended a week-long workshop with Anastasia Salter called Games in the Classroom as a part of Humanities Intensive Learning and Teaching (HILT), an annual training institute in the digital humanities. The participants, with Salter's help, built seven games in five days (some individual, some collaboratively), and on Day 4, she issued this challenge: "Using a default project [in the game-making platform Construct 2] as your starting point, build an academic metagame that uses procedural rhetoric[1] to comment through its mechanics. Consider how the actions in the game relate to your message and outcomes."

At this point in my career I had been teaching games in my First-Year Composition classes for a number of years, focusing on the procedural elements and rhetoric to get students thinking about writing differently. We had previously read Ian Bogost's *How To Do Things With Videogames*, focusing on the chapter on "Empathy," leading us to play "unwinnable" games like Ayiti: The Cost of Life and Spent, where you are challenged to survive living below the poverty line.

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1   Ian Bogost defines procedural rhetoric in his book Persuasive Games as "the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions, rather than the spoken word, writing, images, or moving pictures" (ix).

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I was also, at the time, a contingent faculty member. I wrote extensively about adjunct issues on my blog on Inside Higher Ed, spoke at numerous conferences about these same issues, and cultivated an online identity as someone who was outspoken and knowledgeable about living and working contingently. I knew immediately that the content of my academic metagame would focus on being an adjunct.

But, why a game about being an adjunct? Being an adjunct wasn't a game, at least not the fun game we typically associate with play and gaming. Bogost explains how empathy games subvert the expectations of the player in video games: "Those games [that look to invoke empathy] would do well to invite us to step into the smaller, more uncomfortable shoes of the downtrodden rather than the larger, more well-heeled shoes of the powerful" (19). I wanted players to step into the shoes of an adjunct, providing them the experience while avoiding motives and game mechanics that would squander the potential for empathy. My intention developing this empathy-based experience centered squarely on whoever interacted with my game to feel like a player, rather than feel like they had been played.

Years before, a movement on Twitter would inform my work on Adjunct Run. In late 2011, a new hashtag and handle appeared on Twitter: @occupyMLA and #OMLA. Their purpose was simple: raise awareness about adjunct issues, particularly at the upcoming annual Modern Languages Association conference. This was at the height of the general "occupy" movement that was unfolding at that time. I became one of their largest amplifiers on Twitter as well as one of the people who interacted with their handle the most. In her article "Live/Archive," Kathi Inman Berens notes that my "144 tweets almost triple those of the next most-engaged OMLA participant, Noel Jackson [who had] 50." Berens notes that "[a]t the time of the OMLA installation, Bessette had more than 5000 followers (she now has over 6500), which means that OMLA benefited from exposure in her large professional network.".

I had long been known online as someone who shared resources and was generous with their time. The people behind the handle claimed to be four graduate students trying to succeed in their quest of getting a tenure-track job and avoid the pitfalls of being an adjunct. I recognized their struggles, frustrations, and message. I empathized with them deeply and spent much of my social media capital on them and their message, doing what I could to amplify and support them.

Imagine my surprise when, at the 2013 MLA Conference in Boston, it was revealed that #OMLA and @occupyMLA was nothing more than a game. It was a netprov, a "networked improv narrative" ("What is Netprov"), created by Rob Wittig and Mark C. Marino, and played out over more than a year from late 2011 to January 2013. The Marino's reveal happened at an e-lit reading while I was at dinner with my husband. I had, at my husband's request, turned my phone off; my Twitter notifications at conferences can get overwhelming and this was our first date in a while.

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After a lovely dinner, I turned my phone back on and it was, as the kids say, blowing up with notifications about what had happened at the e-Lit reading. While some after the fact admitted that they suspected it was nothing more than a hoax, I had fallen for it fully. One tweet said that Marino had describe #OMLA as a kind of satire, and in their written explanation of #OMLA, Marino and Wittig described themselves trying to stay "in the liminal zone of naturalistic parody and mockumentary." I found myself wondering who, exactly was being satirized, being played with, who was being made fun of. Where there was once empathy, there was now humiliation and disappointment, at least for me. I felt like I wasn't playing a game—I felt like I was being played.

Fiction and satire can be powerful tools to raise awareness and build empathy, spur action, and promote justice. For satire to be truly effective, there needs to be an understanding between the author and the reader or participant about the nature of the work. Sometimes, the ruse and subsequent anger at being fooled are the point, successfully executed in *A Modest Proposal* for example, but the empathy building in OMLA was never meant to be directed at the authors, but the subjects: adjuncts. In the case of OMLA, my anger was redirected at the authors and not towards those in positions of power in academia that would treat adjuncts as callously as they do.

Procedurally, then, Adjunct Run had to clearly and explicitly be a game. If I wanted to create and maintain a feeling of empathy towards adjuncts, I had to be transparent *and* provocative. I chose an existing runner game template, imagining an adjunct endlessly running to collect classes, dodging the chair who would take classes away, and avoiding falling down pits of despair.

Some of my choices were limited by the time that was allocated to us to complete the game: one afternoon. But these time constraints led to the most productive procedural elements of the game: it never ends and you can never win, nor is there any sort of mechanism that measures your progress from attempt to attempt. In my simple opening screen with the directions, I don't indicate that the player loses if you cross a certain threshold of having too many courses or below a threshold of too few classes. In each case, you are suddenly greeted with the message: "You failed at balance." You also see this message when you fall down one of the pits.

The familiar setting of a runner video game makes it clear to the player that they are, in fact, playing a game, even if the rules aren't explicit. Players are left to figure out the rules as they go, and there is no additional reward for getting good at the game; it never ends unless you fail at balance. I felt, and still feel, that this is an accurate representation of the adjunct "game:" no one explains the rules to you, you learn through failure, and once you start playing, the only way for it to end is to stop playing. There is agency, the ability to choose and to take action, even if the game itself is futile. But what agency there is, is limited—the frantic nature of the race means that there is little time or energy to do anything outside of the game, like organize or unionize. While #OMLA had an

end-date, a time where the creators decided that the game, so to speak, was over, I made sure that players would never be sure when Adjunct Run ended, because the reality is that there isn't some tidy end date, just threats of courses disappearing, health deteriorating, failing at balance. I had to balance having empathy for the player with frustrating their efforts.

Failing at balance in this game just means you have to start again, like so many adjuncts have and keep doing. Except, of course, the consequences for failing at balance for actual adjuncts can and are much more severe: homelessness, food insecurity, health issues, and even death, such as in the case of Margaret Mary Vojtko and others. Death is a hard experience to recreate non-trivially in a video game, where the player character just respawns; but at least I could, procedurally, recreate the palpable frustration that adjuncts feel. I wanted the player to feel bewildered, frustrated, confused. I wanted them to ultimately give up playing.

What was strange to me, however (although probably not so strange to people studying this topic), is that people kept telling me how "addictive" the game was. They got sucked in by the challenge of it, the thrill, and even with no score to track their progress, they kept trying to get further or run for longer than their previous attempts. But even if one did get good at the game, it would become tedious; like the repeating background in old animated shows like *The Flintstones*, the game would simply keep repeating itself endlessly. There is something seductive about the game and thinking you can beat it, much like adjuncting.

I accomplished in a game that takes 10 seconds to fail at what I had been trying to do in all of my writing and activism in the preceding years: recreate the experience of being an adjunct.

I keep coming back to the question about what makes my game about adjuncts different from #OMLA, and in my mind better, more effective. #OMLA eventually ended—the ruse was revealed, and we all moved on. Except, of course, most adjuncts can't, and every year, there is a new fleet of graduate students with too few tenure-track jobs. Perhaps, ultimately, I think I was more effective because I explicitly grounded my fiction in a reality, rather than the other way around.

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Biography

Lee Skallerup Bessette is a Learning Design Specialist at the Center for New Designs In Leaning and Scholarship (CNDLS), Georgetown University. She is currently editing a volume on affective labor in alt-ac careers, forthcoming from Kansas University Press, as well as writing a number of memoirs. Her writing has appeared in *Inside Higher Ed*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Women in Higher Education*, *Profession*, the journal *Pedagogy*, and *Hybrid Pedagogy*, among other places. You can find her on Twitter as @readywriting.

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