SPECIAL ISSUE:  
TEACHING WITH AND ABOUT GAMES  

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AN INTRODUCTION TO THIS ISSUE  

That video games are big business is nothing new. Statistically, this multibillion-dollar industry has grown 9.7 percent between 2009-2012 (compared to the 2.4 percent growth of the US economy) and has added $6.2 billion in U.S. Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Siwek 2014). Further, the soft power of video games can be equally felt as evidenced by this following anecdote: Sir Paul McCartney is currently promoting the game Destiny (Activision/Bungie, 2014) for which he wrote some of the soundtrack. Even a few years ago, perhaps we would have struggled to imagine an iconic rock star who rose to fame in the 1960s helping with public relations for a massively multiplayer shooting game, but today, games are such a key part of the entertainment landscape that these kinds of spectacles have become familiar.

That video games are becoming “big education” is slightly less known. Currently in the US, at least one university in each of the fifty states offers a university degree or program in video games. The Princeton Review ranks video game design programs at both the undergraduate and graduate level, and more and more schools are rolling out programs in game design and related fields. The University of Texas, for example, launched its Denius-Sams Gaming Academy, focused on issues of management and leadership, in 2013. Across the United States and internationally, games are being used to teach, to engage students, and to train students in important skills. In some ways, this seems to correlate to market demand—we need to train more people to enter a highly skilled and in-demand industry. And one that is decentralized (unlike Hollywood).

Yet not all of the classes appear to have this economic incentive. Courses cover game development and design, but also treat games as a topic in fields such as computer science, history, media studies, and rhetoric. In other words, video games are not just an economic force (they make lots of money and so we should teach students to make them) nor are they only a psychological force (games teach people violence and so we need to study policy to limit them); they are also a cultural and creative force, and courses are cropping up that attend to games in this particular framework. Games are worthy of study in the same way that film, literature, and art are worthy of study. These are media that simultaneously reflect and drive culture.

This special issue of the Syllabus Journal, then, offers a multi-disciplinary approach to video game studies. We have organized it with three different categories:
1. **Teaching About Games:** These syllabi attend to teaching the skills and theoretical frameworks common in video game programs—those programs dedicated to creating and engaging with game culture writ large. Ruggill and Behrenshausen’s two articles provide an introduction to game studies. Lindeman’s syllabus reflects a class in which students need to make new input devices for games, pushing students to imagine interaction beyond the handheld controller. Wearn presents a course in game design and production processes, and Preston focuses more specifically on teaching serious game development.

2. **Teaching With Games:** These syllabi see games as a useful text to teach diverse topics, such as history, creative writing, and rhetoric and composition. Games become an important medium to convey information or concepts important in non-game-specific disciplines. Ortega’s article uses games to teach a spatial and non-linear representation of history and power. Both Salter and Winchell look to video games as a form of interactive literature, and Sierra and Moberly’s two pieces use games in rhetoric and composition classes to think through games as persuasive texts.

3. **Toolbox:** These are short assignments that use games or teach game concepts. Some are meant for only a day and some are two-week units. They have been written to be easily incorporated into any course syllabus. Claypool presents a short assignment that teaches network game creation using the Dragonfly engine. Keenen and Bouchard offer their game design process, which they present in humanities workshops. O’Donnell and deWinter present their Alternative Reality Game assignment as a method to teach storytelling in games, while Vie’s piece considers the rule system of games as a means to teach procedural walkthroughs and instructions in a technical writing class. And finally, Martin’s piece provides an annotated bibliography assignment for games and game research.

What we hope to have accomplished in this special issue is bringing together a diverse set of approaches concerning video games in the classroom to start important pedagogical discussions and promote the active sharing of ideas. If anything became apparent in the process of forming this special issue, it’s this: The diversity and creativity found in games have positively influenced the creativity and rigorous approaches developed by our colleagues across multiple institutions.

**WORKS CITED**


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