Playing Games with History

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Over the past decade or two, the notion of "play" has snuck its way into the world of museum education. Working with museums of all stripes, I've found that children's museums and science centers have made play a central goal for the visitor experience. Many art museums also see value in play, for what's more playful than putting a brush to canvas?

History museum professionals, on the other hand, tend to be more wary of the concept. They're not the only ones who remain skeptical about games as learning experiences. The word itself implies a frivolous diversion, lacking in worthy outcomes. Yet games are one of the oldest of human activities, with millennia of formative evaluation behind them. Simply put, games take "play" and wrap it in rules. Strangely, that only makes them more fun. In fact, we recently found in an NSF-funded study of learning styles and online interactives that for children, the play value of an activity was a better predictor of its appeal than other factors such as gender and learning style.[1]

Thinking about learning in games

Of course, just because you're having fun doesn't mean you're learning anything. But it's hard to recall a game that doesn't require some kind of thinking—and often quite sophisticated thinking.

So why is it hard to believe that games facilitate learning? Perhaps it's because games are an inefficient way to transfer information, which has long been a primary goal of education. Why tackle a game when a few simple sentences can do the job? And for some learning objectives, words will do the job quite nicely: *George Washington was the first president of the United States; the Wright Brothers completed the first controlled, powered, and heavier-than-air human flight on December 17, 1903; Martin Luther King delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech to civil rights marchers at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC.* Trivia games are commonly used for this kind of information transfer, but they are the exception in the burgeoning field of learning games, which is inspired by research showing that all knowledge is contextual, rooted in the particulars of experience.

Content drives the gameplay

As vehicles for experiential learning, games engage the imagination, foster motivation, offer context, and provide scaffolding all within a structured, rule-based world. In a digital game, we can recreate the rules of nature and society in a virtual world that puts artifacts back in their historical context. Such games let the content drive the gameplay, in contrast to the simple games that populate many museum websites.

Over twenty years ago, cognitive psychologists Thomas Malone and Mark Lepper distinguished between these two types of games by focusing on the relationship between the game context—which they called its fantasy—and the content (or skills) to be learned. Games in which those two elements depend on each other employ "intrinsic fantasy." A role-play game like *The Oregon Trail* uses intrinsic fantasy because a player's ability to navigate the journey depends on his or her knowledge of the game's historical context. Conversely, games in which the skill and the context are unrelated employ "extrinsic fantasy." For example, the game of hangman uses extrinsic fantasy because the gallows context is irrelevant to the player's ability to guess letters correctly. Games using extrinsic fantasy have long been familiar tools in museum education because no new gameplay design is required. It's easy to retrofit common games with new content.

Elaborate digital games using intrinsic fantasy have long been too costly for museums, but new tools and technologies are making them more affordable. And history subjects certainly provide outstanding content for such games, whether they be role-plays that drop players into the past for first-person exploration and discovery, simulations that let players play god with historical events, or mysteries that challenge players to think like an historian and analyze sources to understand the past.

Colonial Williamsburg, which has long offered a rich physical and social world for role-play, recently produced *Betwixt Folly and Fate*, an immersive 3-D game employing intrinsic fantasy. As the developer of

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A FEW HISTORY LEARNING GAMES

Betwixt Folly and Fate (www.eduweb.com/portfolio-betwixt) is an immersive 3-D role-play game set in 1774 Williamsburg.

Discover Babylon (www.discoverbabylon.org) is an IMLS-funded 3-D game and virtual reconstruction of ancient Babylon, developed by the Federation of American Scientists, the University of California, the Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative (Los Angeles), and the Walters Art Museum. The first version of the game is available as a free download, and the developers are working on a new version.

U-505 Online Activities (www.msichicago.org/exhibit/U505) include two Flash games about the Museum of Science and Industry's WWII German U-boat.

Watch the Bride (www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/keys/games) is one of a variety of Flash games on the McCord Museum's website.

Building Montréal (http://buildingmontreal.net/) is a Flash strategy game that invites players to build their own Montréal by overcoming the many challenges facing the city's real builders during key periods in its development.

this game, my team and I employed the standard conventions of commercial role-play games within the real-world context of early America. Players choose a role from a selection ranging from an enslaved house servant to a young gentleman. Then, instead of swordplay or dragon-slaying, they engage in the ordinary tasks of daily life. For example, Henry, a free black carpenter, must find enough work as a journeyman to pay his mother's rent. As Henry seeks out carpentry work and other tasks that come his way, the player learns about the social classes and customs of the time as well as the opportunities and constraints facing a free black tradesman in 1774. By employing standard game genre conventions, we allow players to focus their attention on the content of the game—the setting, the social interactions, the tasks, and the goals—rather than learning how to play the game itself.

Finding funding

Many funders have recognized the potential of learning games as viable forms of formal and informal education. For example, while NEH has no spe-cific grant program for learning games, Brett Bobley, Director of NEH's Digital Humanities Initiative, told me that game projects that clearly articulate the game's value to researching and teaching humanities could qualify for a number of grant programs. These include traditional categories such as Grants for Teaching and Learning Resources and Curriculum Development, as well as grants under the Digital Humanities Initiative Grants (www.neh.gov/grants/digitalhumanities). IMLS has already funded one 3-D game, *Discover Babylon*, with the Walters Art Museum as a development partner. This project was designed to provide a replicable game environment that other museums could adopt and populate with objects from their own collections. And since games lie at the intersection of digital media and youth culture, they can be an attractive project for private philanthropy as well.

Taking the first step

The games mentioned in the sidebar on the previous page illustrate a range of approaches to learning game development, from lively 2-D Flash games to fully im-mersive 3-D worlds, but the potential for history museums is largely unexplored. Games can reach new audiences while re-contextualizing artifacts and stories in rich and meaningful ways. A dozen years from now, we may see college students choosing a career in public history because of a game they played as a child—but only if we take the first steps now! ◉

Schaller, David, et al., "One Size Does Not Fit All: Learning Style, Play, and On-line Interactives," in J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds). *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings.* Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics. Available online at www.eduweb.com/onesize-abstract.html, Internet.

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