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How to Use OER Games in the College Classroom

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Play is fundamental to learning; so fundamental, in fact, that play is how animals, not just humans learn. While a wide range of pedagogical approaches, institutes, and other opportunities exist to facilitate play experiences in the classroom, most resources are devoted to early childhood or K-12 education. Presumably, by the time a student reaches college or graduate school, they have left their play days behind. But this does not need to be the case. Even though we associate play with children, play can be just as educational for adults. Bringing play to college and graduate students facilitates greater knowledge acquisition and retention. In particular, games allow adults to open themselves up to new content while following best practices in pedagogy.[1]

While commercial games can be incredibly useful,[2] open educational resource (OER) games are even better, for they allow teachers to incorporate play in class not only for free, but also with content they can custom design for their subject and students due to the benefit of open licenses.[3] OER Commons, a repository for OER content, includes 561 OER games for instructors to use. As of June 2018, 94 of these pertain to "community college/lower division," "college/upper division," or "graduate/professional"-level students.[4] Although 94 games may seem to be a high number, OER Commons could benefit from further additions to its holdings, especially games that exist in paper-based forms rather than solely digitally.

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[1] Games are not the same as gamification. Games-based learning "is simply learning through games" while gamification is "the application of game-like mechanics to non-game entities to encourage a specific behavior." Teach Thought Staff, "The Difference between Gamification and Game-Based Learning," Teach Thought, November 24, 2015, https://www.teachthought.com/learning/difference-gamification-game-based-learning/.

[2] More studies of game-based learning pertain to K-12 education than higher education.

[3] "OER Commons & Open Education," OER Commons, https://www.oercommons.org/about.

[4] "Search Results," OER Commons, https://www.oercommons.org/browse?batch_size=20&sort_by=title&view_mode=summary&f.material_types=game&f.sublevel=community-college-lower-division&f.sublevel=college-upper-division&f.sublevel=graduate-professional.

Human(ities) Games proposes to help fill this curricular gap by providing peer reviewed OER games and corresponding curricula.[5] *Codex Conquest* teaches the contemporary value of historical printed books and how these books changed history by contributing to technological advancements, scientific breakthroughs, artistic triumphs, and political shifts from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century.[6] *Mark* teaches students to identify aspects of early modern visual culture, such as symbols and mottos, by playing a variety of games with a deck of cards made up of printers' marks, also known as printers' devices.[7] *Laysan Island* teaches the conservation challenges associated individual bird species on a remote Pacific Island at the turn of the twentieth century; to win, students must save more species than happened historically.[8] *Egghead* asks students to match male and female birds of the same species with their corresponding nest and egg to illustrate sexual dimorphism and the impact of habitat. Players who want more of a challenge can add each species' English and Latin names to the puzzle.[9] Each game can be played on its own or accompanied by a variety of enrichment activities, such as specially-designed visits to local holdings to see content related to the game, prompts to critique the game's design to foster information literacy, assignments to expand or recreate the game according to new topic areas, and questions that allow students to use the game as a starting point for further research.

If a visit to a local special collections repository, museum, or gallery is planned, ask students to compare the game's components to the resources they see and/or prompt students to identify strengths and weaknesses in the local collection. It helps to ask a librarian, curator, or docent to discuss the collection's history, any current exhibits, and particular qualities of individual pieces.

[5] Amy Chen, Human(ities) Games, June 2017, https://humangames.lab.uiowa.edu/.

[6] *Codex Conquest*, Human(ities) Games, June 2018, https://humangames.lab.uiowa.edu/events.

[7] *Mark*, Human(ities) Games, June 2018, https://humangames.lab.uiowa.edu/articles.

[8] *Laysan Island*, Human(ities) Games, June 2018, https://humangames.lab.uiowa.edu/games/laysan-island.

[9] *Egghead*, Human(ities) Games, https://humangames.lab.uiowa.edu/games/egghead.

Enrich class conversations with questions that force students to think critically about a game's construction. For example, ask whose viewpoints are represented or omitted from the game. If the game was created from the opposite perspective, what content would change? How would the game work differently? Or focus on the game's mechanics, which is how the game works. Ask students to identify each component of the game (cards, timers, dice, tokens, and so forth) and how it operates to communicate content while generating play. How could different components or the same components used differently reengineer the game's learning objectives? If students find those prompts difficult to answer, then ask them to write a review of the game. What does it do well and what could be improved?

Graphic design tells consumers what to expect from a product. Games are no different; before players even begin, they have an expectation of what the experience will be like based on what they see on the box. Ask students to evaluate the game's graphic design by having them identify the target audience, including age and educational level. Then prompt them to redesign how the game looks to suit a different audience using whatever media they prefer. Make sure to ask students to consider what the cost of their end product and if it meets accessibility requirements for, say, color-blind or low-vision players.

Additionally, use the game to prompt your students to do additional research. After all, cards limit the amount of information on any one given item or topic. Through additional inquiry, students can flesh out what they saw during play to gain a broader perspective on the topic at hand.

Multimedia

Visit.jpg

Lovangel Faulk, Scattergood Friends School & Farm student visiting the University of Iowa's Special Collections & Archives, April 2017

Critique.jpg

NAME, NAME, NAME, and NAME, University of Iowa, September 2016

Redesign.jpg

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Research.jpg

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