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Playing Around with Book History: Codex Conquest and Mark

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Codex Conquest and *Mark*
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Abstract

While the value of play often is emphasized only for children, play has a role in higher education as well. Play encourages students to confront new information with curiosity rather than fear and with a flexible rather than fixed mindset. As book history is a complex field—curators, librarians, archivists, booksellers, auctioneers, collectors, artisans, conservationists, and a whole host of other professionals are just as involved in its work and study as students and scholars—play is a wonderful way to address this overwhelm because it generates a positive state of flow. In particular, specially-designed games help students begin to address their book history learning curve. Using two common points of entry for students working with rare books for the first time—"how much is this book worth?" and "this book is really pretty!"—*Codex Conquest* and *Mark* help instructors guide students through their own inquiry.

Paper

While the value of play often is emphasized only for children, play has a role in higher education as well. To summarize what most of us think about when we think about play, in 2014, the Government of Education in the United Kingdom asserted, "Play is essential for children's development, building their confidence as they learn to explore, think about problems, and relate to others. Children learn by leading their own play, and by taking part in play which is guided by adults."[1] In fact, play is often referred to as "invisible pedagogy," for it can teach without an instructor's intervention.

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Confidence, problem-solving, and relational development are not skills that we achieve early on and then draw upon seamlessly for the rest of our life. These skills must be constantly updated to suit new demands. Within higher education, students must be encouraged to confront new information with curiosity rather than fear and with a flexible rather than fixed mindset. And, as the problems students confront become increasingly complex over time, they are even more likely to need others.

Consider how active the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) listserv is: every day, researchers ask one another for help. What makes SHARP so powerful is that it brings together folks from a variety of homes across history, publishing, languages, and literature. Furthermore, studying book history requires talking to curators, librarians, archivists, booksellers, auctioneers, collectors, artisans, conservationists, and a whole host of other professionals engaged in bookish activities.

This wide world of book studies can be overwhelming for the student used to the closed circuit of academia. Individuals outside the traditional dyad of professor-student may be friendly experts, eager to help and enthusiastic about their knowledge, but the learning curve of appreciating the contexts in which books were and are created, circulated, and consumed is steep—so steep, in fact, that none of us ever master it. We all just learn about our piece of the puzzle.

Play addresses the problem of this overwhelm because it generates a positive state of flow. By playing, students can begin to address their book history learning curve. As "a player is so engaged and absorbed in the problem-solving activity that he/she loses the sense of effort and repetition, and gains powerful satisfaction," play is a way to introduce and deepen concepts without emphasizing the learning process itself.[2]

While students in higher education can use play to address overwhelm through inducing a flow state of consciousness, just like those in early childhood education, they are not preschoolers

and should not be treated as such. Enter specially-designed games calibrated to suit the advanced abilities of later learners.

Many disciplines such as economics,[3] mathematics,[4] and science[5] have long seen the value of games in their college and graduate-school curricula. However, liberal arts disciplines are less attuned to the value of games, seeing them more as a subject of study than a pedagogical strategy. In 2011, game studies was defined by Oxford University Press' Dictionary of Media and Communication as "a fledgling field within the humanities that studies videogames as well as other forms of play as important cultural phenomena."[6] For examples of this type of inquiry, see *Game Studies: The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, currently looking forward to its nineteenth volume as of January 2019, or MIT Press' Game Studies Series, which published 85 titles in the past 20 years.[7]

Thus game development in the humanities is a relatively new venture. Back in 2012, Pauline Rooney gave a talk at the European Conference on Games Based Learning. There, she remarked, "[c]onsidering the expertise in most higher education institutions [in both "subject matter/pedagogy and game design/development"] and the recent surge in serious games courses at third level, one might reasonably conclude that higher education holds huge potential for developing serious games in-house. Yet surprisingly, such ventures are relatively few."[8]

My game lab, Human(ities) Games, is among those few ventures although my work did not begin until 2016, four years after Rooney surveyed the field. Three years, innumerable play tests, and the patience and guidance of my colleagues later, I invented two games that teach book history concepts: *Codex Conquest* and *Mark*.

Codex Conquest allows students to recognize the most important books of Western civilization by their nation, century, genre, and current monetary value. Along the way, students learn European history and the scenarios that influence the shape of institutional collections.

Mark introduces students to the hallmarks of early modern visual culture by allowing them to play a variety of games with a single deck of cards comprised of printer's marks (devices). As open educational resources (OERs), both games can be downloaded for free from their respective websites, used as is or changed to suit an instructor's objectives, and come with supplemental curricula to help teachers figure out which learning objectives suit their course goals. Ever sensitive to time, I ensured that both games can be played in a single class period, although *Codex Conquest* can run over an hour if players debate their book choices and engage in a lot of trades while *Mark*, which is a deck rather than a single game, has a variety of play length options. That said, most *Mark*-based games run shorter than 30 minutes.

I could go in depth on how *Codex Conquest* and *Mark* adapt a variety of book history concepts into gameplay. However, introducing all the concepts would take more time than I have, so I will pick one example for each game.

Overwhelm might prevent students from learning, but students do have natural curiosity regarding rare books. As a former special collections librarian, I saw that students always want to know how much our holdings are worth. And I am speaking of financial value, not cultural value. Is this something that comes up in your classes too? *Codex Conquest* gets right to that issue—it may not provide exact figures, but through a scale it allows students to compare relative financial values and see that what they think is expensive may not in fact be as costly as they imagined, although sometimes cultural value does indeed translate to a high price tag. Humanities students do not usually make the jump from cultural to financial value as the latter is seen as a topic better suited to those studying the library and information sciences. Yet to ignore humanities' students' natural curiosity regarding how the book market historically and currently assesses price robs students of the opportunity to more deeply engage with book history.

Mark does not entertain students with the thrill of learning how much *On the Origin of Species* might set you back. Instead, *Mark* satisfies students' evergreen pleasure of looking at the beauty of rare books. Then, it transforms that innate appreciation into research queries. How do we know which marks are older? How do we decide which symbols belong to which country? Do those symbols actually stay in circulation only within one nation's borders or do they get picked up elsewhere? What features reoccur time and time again in printer's marks and why are they so popular? What do all these unicorns and anchors and dolphins mean, anyway?

Both *Codex Conquest* and *Mark* take common points of entry—how much is that book worth and wow, that paratext is pretty! (not that they say it that way)—and ground these comments into more substantial discussion. Granted, these conversations do not need to occur in a game setting, but games invite students to reflect critically on their own interests rather than feeding them pre-selected topics according to only our own learning objectives.

I will conclude with a short statement of how game development in general relates to digital humanities. My games are paper-based, but most folks assume when I mention my game development work that I make video games. While video games provide wonderfully immersive learning environments, I go the low-fi route because of my own ignorance. There is just no way I can teach myself video game development while I hold a full-time job! But, like any good academic, I can talk myself out of that corner. Card games are easier for others to adapt. Because OER depends on other instructors easily using and remixing content, and most of us are not computer programmers, my lack of knowledge is not a problem—it is an asset!

But a focus on a physical product should not mean that these games are disqualified from the digital humanities. Rather, my games move digital humanities into a new direction. Digital humanities is a methodology that applies digital tools to address new research and teaching queries. My query is "how can I teach students book history in a new way that is both free and easy to

implement?" Digital humanities gave me the answer: use a simple website to build an audience for free, adaptable curricula, and make that curricula look different than what is currently taught. My DH is not about using the flashiest technology but the right technology. And my DH is also a mindset: it is about working together, across hierarchies and job titles, to make something that is useful to as many people as possible. I will stop here, but I hope I have gotten you excited about the possibilities of using games to address the steep learning curve faced by students of book history. Thank you.

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[1] Department of Education, "Statutory Framework for the Early Years' Foundation Stage: Setting the Standards for Learning, Development, and Care for Children from Birth to Five," Government of the United Kingdom, 2008. goo.gl/CFtNJ. Cited in Julie Stirrup, John Evans, and Brian Davies, "Early Years learning, play pedagogy, and social class," *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38.6 (2017), 872-886. https://doi.org/10.1080/01425692.2016.1182010.

[2] M. Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, New York: Harper Perennial, 1991 and L. Ermi and F. Mäyrä, "Fundamental components of the gameplay experience: Analyzing Immersion," S. De Castell and J. Jenson, Eds., *Changing Views: Worlds in Play, Selected Papers of the 2005 Digital Games Research Association's Second International Conference*, New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2005. Cited in Fengfeng Ke, Kui Xie, and Ying Xie, "Game-based Learning Engagement: A Theory and Data-Driven Exploration," *British Journal of Educational Technology* 47. 6 (2016), 1183-1184.

[3] Loretti Dobrescu, Ben Greiner, and Alberta Motta, "Learning economics concepts through game-play: An experiment," *International Journal of Education Research* 69 (2015), 23-37. 10.1016/j.ijer.2014.08.005.

[4] Edward Smith and Lewis Golding, "Use of Board Games in Higher Education Literature Review," *MSOR Connections* 16.2 (2018), 24-29.

[5] Pieternella Luttikhuizen, "Teaching Evolution using a card game: negative frequency-dependent selection," Journal of Biological Education 52.2 (2018), 122-129. 10.1080/00219266.2017.1420677.

[6] "Videogame studies (game studies)," Eds. Daniel Chandler and Rod Mundlay, *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. [Available through Oxford Reference Online]

[7] See: *Game Studies, The International Journal of Computer Game Research*, http://gamestudies.org/1801/about; MIT Press, Game Studies Series, https://mitpress.mit.edu/topics/game-studies?page=0.

[8] Pauline Rooney, "Creating Serious Games at Third Level: Evaluating the Implications of an In-House Approach," *Proceedings of the European Conference on Games Based Learning* 1 (2012), Abstract.