BY ERIC STAPLES  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

UW junior Eliot Hemingway thought carefully about which texts he wanted to present to the focus group he’s leading this spring quarter. He selected both strategy and action titles represented in his selection, but wanted to make sure they were both mainstream. Hemingway decided on two video-game texts: “Civilization IV” and “Prince of Persia: The Two Thrones.”

Despite the common attitude toward gaming as exemplified in things like the Odegaard Library’s sign warning against it — Hemingway believes games have a pedagogical future.

“Games are another facet of mass media,” Hemingway said. “They have their role in shaping norms and values in society.”

With strong interests in history and political science, Hemingway’s choices of games for the focus group reflect these themes. “Civilization IV,” for instance, looks at the role of the individual in history and examines the importance of a solid educational system infrastructure.

The lessons in the focus group extend beyond leveling up characters, finding cheats or navigating hidden passages. They go beyond simply experiencing the game. To be understood critically, a player has to go beyond the desires of gamer culture, Schenold said, but it doesn’t mean they can’t be critically played.

Hemingway has been a gamer since his early teens, but his critical perspective toward games kicked into full gear when he took the class “Poetics of Play,” a CHID course facilitated and led by UW graduate student and Critical Gaming Project (CGP) founder Terry Schenold.

The CGP is a group of undergraduate and graduate students working together to create resources for the critical study of digital games. Among other goals, the organization works together to develop courses and focus groups that center on gaming.

A student of games, Schenold felt digital games had academic potential that wasn’t being utilized. To help find a solution to this, he developed the CGP to increase awareness of critical gaming. Schenold developed the CGP in the winter of 2008 along with “Warcraft,” the CGP’s first course.

“There was no sustained inquiry to be found anywhere, no resources for how to teach using game media, [or] why you might want to do it... and all of this at the most important historical moment for students to engage: at the formative stages of inquiry,” Schenold said.

While he sees unexplored potential in gaming, he isn’t unaware of the popular criticism against it.

Schenold said one of the goals of the CGP is to challenge the common critiques that gaming is all about escapism, violence, sexism and frivolity — critiques that have been leveled against gaming since the 1980s.

“We must accept that there is nothing implicit in the act of gaming... that completely exonerates the experience from [those] critiques,” he said. “The skeptical parent you ask to play through these EA’s is most likely to see a game about killing people with strange weapons and behaving like an irresponsible Batman.”

Most mainstream games are ready-made for the desires of gamer culture, Schenold said, but that doesn’t mean they can’t be critically played.

To be understood critically, a player has to go beyond simply experiencing the game. One such mainstream game that can be studied critically is “World of Warcraft” (WOW), which is this week’s video-game text in Ed Chang’s English 207 class. Students have noticed the parallels between WOW and real life.

“It’s actually been very interesting to note that, for a totally fantasy game, there are few elements of the world of the game that aren’t direct reflections of the familiar,” said Rachael Strom, a junior in Chang’s class.

While Chang wants students to have fun and enjoy playing the game, he also wants students to break apart common definitions of “game,” “fun” and “play.”

“First and foremost the class is an Introduction to culture studies,” he said. “They [video games] are the medium through which we learn about culture studies. A video game class is not a vindication to play without critical thinking.”

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PHOTOS BY ROB WATTERS / THE DAILY

Ed Chang opens up World of Warcraft on the projector for his "Virtual Worlds & Video Games" course Feb. 23.