THE DAILY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

Features

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THURSDAY, MARCH 5, 2009 » 3

Get your game on

Students analyze how video games influence society

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UW junior Eliot Hemingway thought carefully about which texts he wanted to present to the focus group he's leading spring quarter. He wanted 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 signs 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 what somebody might find in the common walkthrough guidebook. In fact, most of the take-home lessons can't be found on GameStop's store shelves.

"I want people to come away with both general awareness and an analytical method that they can apply to specific instances of games as communicative media," Hemingway said.

Whether a student has a box of worn-out controllers or is brand new to gaming, Hemingway welcomes gamers and non-gamers alike. Non-gamers, Hemingway said, provide a rich and interesting critical perspective to the game.

"It's not about being amazing at the game, it's about how the game interacts with the player," he said.

The games in his focus group are more mainstream. They are the same ones used to relax from a hard day, but that's far from what Hemingway intends to do with them.

The challenge of taking games seriously isn't easy, but Hemingway is not alone in this quest.

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 as Playcraft," 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 "Deus Ex" 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

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.

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.

Chang, a UW graduate student in English and cultural studies, is a member of the CGP.

This week his class will have the digital landscape of WOW displayed on the projector screen, with a mage, gnome or other WOW character breathing idly in the scenic forefront.

These characters provide for a study of racial logics and classism.

"I've never thought too much about how or why WOW characters are default white [race], and why that could be problematic," said Nadine Tabing, a sophomore also taking Chang's course. "I've never thought about how the WOW races are based on real-life race."

With a whole slew of different video games on the course syllabus, Chang is finishing the course with a two-week WOW capstone.

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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Eliot Hemingway discusses the ideas behind a spring quarter seminar, "Actions Speak Louder: Discussing Procedural Literacy in Digital Games," which he will teach.