The Siren Song of Digital Simulation: Games, Procedural Rhetoric, and the Process of Historical Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper contrasts the importance of procedural rhetoric for the use of games in university and college level historical education with the use of history themed digital simulations. This paper starts by examining how history functions as a form of disciplinary knowledge and how this disciplinary way of knowing things is taught in the post secondary history course. The manner in which history is taught is contrasted with its evaluation to better define what students are actually expected to learn. The simulation is then examined in light of learning goals and evaluation. This demonstrates that simulations are a poor fit for most post secondary history courses. The more appropriate and effective choice is to construct the past via procedural rhetoric as a way to use digital video games to make the historical argument.

Keywords: Digital Humanities, Digital Simulation, Evaluation, Game Based Learning, Historical Education, History, Procedural Rhetoric

INTRODUCTION

This paper suggests a different approach to game based learning for history and challenges the more common and popular use of digital simulations. This builds upon our previous work on a digital mode for history, with the use of procedural rhetoric to author scholarly history in a gamic form, by applying it directly to historical education and student learning. Due to our emphasis on procedural rhetoric, this paper is based largely, although not exclusively, on the North American work done into game based learning over the past few decades. It will start by examining how history functions as a form of disciplinary knowledge and how this disciplinary way of knowing things is taught in the post-secondary history course. The manner in which it is taught will be contrasted with its evaluation to better define what students are actually expected to learn. The simulation, a very popular tool for digital game based attempts to teach history, will be then examined in the light of learning goals and evaluation. This will demonstrate that simulations are in fact a poor fit for most post secondary history courses.

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The more appropriate and effective choice is to construct the past via procedural rhetoric as a way to use digital video games to make the historical argument. While our focus here is on history as a discipline, our conclusions are applicable to learning in other academic disciplines where the focus is on how arguments are constructed and truth is created, as opposed to merely memorizing and conveying content.

The digital mode results from the application of procedural rhetoric to scholarly history to produce a valid argument that optimizes the use of computers for university and college level historical studies. The digital mode of history was first presented as a way of communicating scholarly research at the Seventy Years On: New Perspectives on the Second World War in the Fall of 2009. The paper discussed how history as a disciplinary form of knowledge is not mode dependent, where mode is the technological medium through which the scholarly argument is constructed and conveyed. For example historical arguments can be conveyed through the printed scholarly article and monograph, the oral classroom lecture, documentary film or computer video game. History is not mode dependent because it is defined by its epistemologies which are dependent upon a series of creative processes such as empathetic re-enactment, limited counterfactual, and narrative reconstruction. The point of the digital mode is not to replace the textual mode found in print, but to offer a multi-modal approach to presenting valid scholarly interpretations of the past, whether they are constructionist, de-constructionist, or re-constructionist histories.

In the realm of education it does what Karras (1994) has stated is essential in an approach to teaching historical argumentation, in that it can be explicitly taught, performed, and evaluated. The digital mode of history allows new questions to be asked, old questions to be addressed in new ways, and constructions of the past to be communicated more effectively. The digital mode offers exactly what students want; challenging content, exciting methodologies, and engagement with the material (Russell & Pellegrino, 2008).

This paper considers the application of the digital mode to historical education, and describes how arguments are created in the digital mode using Ian Bogost’s ideas of procedural rhetoric. Procedural rhetoric becomes a significant tool to understand how the digital mode constructs an argument in a way that is relevant in the context of historical education.

CONSTRUCTING THE PAST AS HISTORY

In order to express knowledge in a different format, whether that format is a digital simulation or a gamic representation of a scholarly argument, it is important to know how that knowledge exists. It is crucial to make that decision intentionally because it shows an epistemic awareness that we also want to see in students as critical thinkers. Epistemic cognition is particularly important for history students as valid representations of the past are constructed radically differently depending on the epistemic choices made. Epistemic cognition is the process that enables individuals to develop the criteria for limits and certainty of knowing (Maggioni, VanSledright, & Alexander, 2009), which enables a constructive approach to ambiguity as opposed to the common student misapprehension that historical certainty exists.

While there have been many attempts to address the epistemological question, “what is history?”. Alun Munslow provides a functional answer that is useful for analyzing digital expression of the past. In his works Narrative and History (2007) and The New History (2003) he defines three broad epistemological approaches for historical scholarship: reconstruction, construction and deconstruction. This paper will borrow these categories to understand the nature of history and place it as a form of disciplinary knowledge in the post-secondary history classroom. Munslow’s (2003, 2007) three epistemological approaches make it clear how some expressions of the past, such as history-themed commercial digital games
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