Equality Game, Anxiety Attack, and Misfortune:
A Pedagogical Post-Mortem on Engines, Modding, and the Importance of Player Experience

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In this chapter, I present a post-mortem covering three consecutive offerings of a course on persuasive games at the university level over a three-year period from 2010 – 2013. The course, "Designing Persuasive Games," is part of a larger, multi-disciplinary program on digital media and game design. In this course, students are invited to engage both with theory and praxis, the process of "practicing" theory (Shaffer, 2004), by not only reading and writing about persuasive games but also through the design and development of one. Here, I present the overall design of the course across the three offerings and describe the most significant aspects of the course, from a pedagogical perspective, that I believe to be of value to others designing similar courses. These aspects include choosing a game engine, scaling projects to retain rhetoric, modding as praxis, and player experience testing. A sample grading rubric for persuasive games is also included at the conclusion of this chapter.

BACKGROUND

The *Designing Persuasive Games* course is a third year undergraduate course offered in a multi-disciplinary media studies programme. Students in this program take a number of core courses together, but are otherwise able to construct their academic path through the selection of electives from a multitude of disciplines, including computer science, visual art, history, classics, and geography. As such, the students who elect to take the *Designing Persuasive Games* course in their third year have extremely varied strengths and skill sets. Despite their unique backgrounds and academic trajectories, they all have one thing in common: an interest in video games and gamer culture. This is also something they have in common with their instructor.

Like my students I have also come from a multidisciplinary background. As an undergraduate I pursued a degree in music while I paid my tuition by building websites. I came to learn how to program as a bit of a hobby during my undergraduate studies, and later found myself teaching web design at the local community college. A lifelong video game enthusiast, I wound up pursuing a master's degree and later a PhD with a focus on game design. My academic work in this field led me to teach courses on game development at a number of institutions, always to a group of (mostly) male programmers looking to break into the industry, but my favourite course to date is and always has been the *Designing Persuasive Games* course.

Whereas the other undergraduate courses I taught focused on programming in *ActionScript* or preparing game design documentation, the *Designing Persuasive Games* course presented a chance for me to design a course where students could engage with the theoretical implications of some of the most influential games scholars through the design of a serious game. For many reasons, each iteration of the course involved a great deal of trial and error as I attempted to find the best mix of theory and praxis, the process of "practicing" theory (Shaffer, 2004). Aside from Ian Bogost, who should they read? As students with a diverse skill set, what kinds of projects can they tackle? Do they work better alone or in groups? How can I guide them so that they are happy with the ways in which their final game conveys their message to future players? With these questions in mind, I present what I believe to be the four most significant aspects of the course design and reflect upon how these pedagogical approaches worked with an interdisciplinary group of students. These are: choosing a game engine, scaling projects to retain rhetoric, modding as praxis, and the importance of player experience testing.

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