

Introducing Game Studies with *Small Worlds*
Professor Amanda Phillips
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ENGL 259: Introduction to Game Studies

Media Required:

David Shute, *Small Worlds*: <http://jayisgames.com/games/small-worlds/>

Learning Outcomes:

- To point out some of the unique rhetorical and aesthetic properties of games: procedurality (creating meaning by going through a process); spatial storytelling (how narrative information is frequently inscribed on space itself, and how movement drives narrative action); mechanics (what the game allows you to do); rules and goals (what the game encourages you to do); and the importance of player actions and decisions
- To identify how some rhetorical and aesthetic properties of games are similar to other media.
- To understand that games can come in a variety of forms, and they do not have to be the violent, flashy, fast-paced objects to which we are accustomed.

Recommended Preparatory Readings:

Jenkins, Henry. "Game Design and Narrative Architecture," in *First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, Game*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Pat Harrigan. Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 2004. 118-130.

Galloway, Alexander. "Gamic Action, Four Moments," in *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2006. 1-38.

Small Worlds is an exploratory game tasks the player with finding their way through a pixelated maze. The screen begins completely black, and as the player traverses more territory, they uncover an increasingly complicated pixelated scene that zooms further outward as more pieces are uncovered.

This is the first game that I show to my Intro to Game Studies students, and it is a useful demonstration for any humanities classes that are incorporating the study of games into their curriculum. It is nonviolent, easy to play, and can be completed in a few minutes.

In the context of a humanities class, *Small Worlds* is an excellent game to use for conversations about the fundamental properties of games, including the centrality of space and movement to narrative in games and how simple mechanics (such as the widening field of view) can encourage the gamer to perform specific tasks without explicit instructions. Understanding the unique aesthetic and rhetorical properties of games can lead to discussions about how other media use different representational and persuasive strategies.

Classroom Activity:

Project the game onto a screen in front of the classroom (make sure that the sound is working) and play through the first maze without entering any of the colorful portals at the bottom of the image. I find it useful (and frequently inevitable) to explore dead ends, make mistakes, and otherwise perform the game inexpertly for students. This will be useful for conversation later.

Once you have completed the demo, have a discussion with the students about the aesthetic, narrative, and gamic properties of *Small Worlds*. I find that opening it up for them to talk about what caught their attention most can lead into a great conversation about how games communicate in ways both similar to and different from other types of media. In my experience, students are intuitively able to identify the relevant meaning making mechanisms of the game, but they do occasionally need help from some guiding questions.

Some relevant questions to guide the conversation:

What is the goal of this game?

How does the game encourage the player to complete this goal?

What might this goal have to say about the values or ideological perspective of the game itself?

Does this game have a narrative? How do we know?

What does the design of the environment tell us about the game's world?

How does movement work in this game?

How did it feel for you to watch me play?

When we have thoroughly discussed this initial scene, and if time permits, I will play part of one of the other levels (by going through one of the colored portals) and discuss how it adds/complicates to the understanding we developed based on the first level.