Learning Through Play, HIST3812 Module 1 Reflection

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There's a certain vagueness to the idea of using play to explore history, because by its very nature 'play' can be any number of diverse and interesting things. The idea of creating play is what I have chosen, personally, to dedicate my career to in taking a game design degree at Carleton. While I could have created them as a hobby without a computer science background, I felt like learning to code and create digital games gave me so many more options to do so. This course, at least this module, has encouraged me to look back at what I thought of as 'good' game design and challenge it by considering if power fantasy and flashy graphics might be challenged by more simple, yet more profound messages when it comes to engaging audiences. It has also, specifically, educated us on what a respectful use of historical precedent can look like, and how to go about creating 'authentic' experiences even if they are not necessarily fact.

The most impactful thing I believe to have read in the course is the story of a class's endeavour to create a hoax about the last American pirate (Kelly, T. Mills. 2014) - a story that's so grounded in reality that it could have been real, and indeed even fooled historians and a publisher through its accuracy and craftsmanship (via a personal blog updated over time). Ethically, it might be considered wrong to create a false story about the times, but it also reminded me of traditional folk legends, such as the lochness monster that while (very likely) unreal, create wonder and 'enchantment' in its audience that encourages them to learn more about local history. Because (good) games by their nature tend to give the player a degree of choice and are framed to be fun, it is difficult to take the past and make an enjoyable experience out of it if done literally. Some enchantment and fictivity are going to be applied so that the audience enjoys the experience, which is hopefully authentic more than anything else. As an aside, I think the very best game that comes to mind when I consider historically authentic games is 'Kingdom Come: Deliverance.' Not only is the game generally amazing, but it uses as many true to life elements as it possibly can, it set in a real historical place and time, dealing with the events that unfolded there, but it also includes a large codex unlocked over the course of the game that frames learning more about the local history as a reward in a way no other game has gotten me to so excited for before.

Tangents aside, this is to say that to me, I found myself learning how to engage an audience while providing an informative experience. When I was thinking of how to present my Interstitial project, I did my best to model the futility of trying to lead a country swept up in the modern COVID-19 pandemic. However, there have been many pandemics over history. I was encouraged to consider them as well, and while the circumstances were similar, and I gave them much thought, I felt like the particular actions I wanted to provide to the player would only work in a more modern context. Things like seeking a cure through science at the expense of preventative measures or quality of life in the meantime, or protecting the people but earning their hate are elements that leaders in the past had less control over directly either due to lack of communication or transportation across their realms. Surely these things could be mandated locally, but these larger, country-wide operations where everything is pinned on the one person in charge seems to me to be something uniquely modern.  It is a characteristic of modern society to pin an entire country's direction on one person, and when fortune slips away, no matter if the leader is virtuous, selfish, or just dumb, they get the blame. Perhaps not everyone thinks it's their fault, but they are tragically responsible for the fate of their people no matter the circumstance. This isn't to say we shouldn't critique our leaders, or monitor them, or downplay their influence, but it was a concept that I thought I could best explain through play, and one that we all have lived through. Surely the

highschool history books in the future will mark this at least as prominently as the great depression, a reminder that living through history is often less comfortable than reading about it.

Twine has been a long-term partner of mine, a companion I've completed many a school project with, and almost always with a stupidly large group (6+) that doesn't care to learn the program or to even be available for communication with their team-mates, resulting in a messy multiple choice story remade the day before the submission deadline with incoherent messages and next to no quality control. It's also been something I've played many games with personally, though my venture into this was long enough ago that I forget the names of even the best ones. I love twine, and I'm pleased to have finally provided something that I consider to be of decent quality with it during my university degree through our class, and I hoped that I helped one or two others do the same. Seeing the other students engage with it so earnestly even without the same experiences I've had with it was inspiring - not only was it a good medium to do our projects, but it also brought a very important realisation to me: the way the class itself is taught is an 'enchanted' form of typical university learning. Getting students to take their own directions, collaborate, and enjoy their work wouldn't work for every class, but it does for this one. Even encouraging these reflections and the very concept of an un-essay takes the boring stodginess out of the idea of learning and provides, in my eyes, an avenue for excellence and pride in one's work. When a student chooses their project, their message, and honestly attempts to accomplish it, it is something they'll remember for as long as they live. I certainly won't be remembering the repetitive papers for other classes, nor the methodical algorithms work needed for computer science (except to have nightmares, naturally), but in the same way that I was given choice for my honours project this year, the direction I choose to take will make things more interesting and engaging, and I will remember the lessons they taught like my parents can remember what they chose for their honours projects as well.

But back to the content of the class and this module in particular, I found Dany Guay-Belanger's discussion on what 'makes' a game experience complete. He's very right in that it's often more than just the gameplay itself. A community forms around the game, the learning curve might encourage online tutorials and playthroughs that spark a revolution in popularity like Minecraft famously did. Fanart might lure in even non-'gamers' to enjoy the setting and the characters, and the development from one medium to another (such as the use of League of Legends characters Jinx, Jayce, Vi, etc. in Riot's 'Arcane' netflix show) create an experience that's so much more than just what's on screen. I find this element difficult to tap into at present in my interest, but it's something that's kept with me and changed how I think about popular culture. It makes me wonder if broader genres like 'victorian era' themes media could even be applied to this, and fans of that genre might feel similarly to fans of certain games. This could prove an effective way to teach history if refined and tapped into because of how innately engaging it can be. Marc Saurette's history courses use a technique he calls 'react to the past,' where each student is given a character with goals and motivations, and they are bid to research the events the course focuses on and see their character succeed with or against the other students. This playful recreation of history has not only been famously popular among students at Carleton University with ever-increasing enrollment in his classes, but also might be the closest thing to capturing this in a historical and educational context that I am familiar with.

At present I struggle to consider what my un-essay will be about in particular, but these themes of enchantment, engagement, education, and play that arise again and again in my thoughts will be undoubtedly related. I hope that this reflection has provided some useful insight as to how I feel about the course and the themes as well as what among them has stuck with me the best. While I've read more than I've mentioned here (I do try to keep up with the readings), I try to include only those I best resonate with and feel that I have the most to say about.

From required source to curiosity, from argument to broader understanding, or from completing a degree 'just for the paper' to developing a lifeline affinity for learning: Long live enchantment, the element that makes learning more than a simple tool to get from point A to point B.

Citation References:

"Kelly, T. Mills, 2014. "True Facts or False Facts—Which Are More Authentic?". *Pastplay: Teaching and Learning History with Technology*."