

Teaching Intersectionality through Critical Game Design

60-minute workshop run by Bonnie Ruberg and Vicki Callahan

In teaching a class on feminist praxis, it can be challenging to present the concept of “intersectionality” or the interlocking systems of oppression that produce and maintain cultures of domination without flattening out the real hierarchies and privileges that exist or, in turn, essentializing identity. In this workshop, we offer an exercise of critical design on diversity that challenges participants to create a game on “intersectionality,” which helps participants to understand how systems may operate in tandem to oppress (encourage “othering” and discrimination) or, conversely, disassembled to liberate (foster community and activism). This heuristic exercise is intended both as a tool for teachers to bring into the classroom as well learning experience for students to understand the complexity of systems of power.

The roadmap for the workshop will include an introduction on how games might provide us with new insights into models of structural oppression as well as the possibilities for imagining counter publics. Participants will be given a basic tool kit outlining basic elements of game design with attention to building systems of mechanics and shaping player experience goals. In groups they will then be asked to identify two areas or systems of power and to explore how these vectors intersect. Based on their selection and conversation, groups will do a rapid prototype for a game that illuminates how the system reinforces the power dynamics or inverts the system so that alliances rather than hierarchies and inequalities are formed. Extended time will be given to play testing each of the groups’ design as well as a closing feedback session.

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics." *U. Chi. Legal F.* (1989): 139.

Flanagan, Mary, and Helen Nissenbaum. *Values at Play in Digital Games*. 1 edition. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014. Print.

Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 1 edition. New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.

hooks, bell. *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*. 2 edition. New York: Routledge, 2014. Print.

UNDERSTANDING INTERSECTIONALITY THROUGH CRITICAL GAME DESIGN

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- Research: gender and sexuality in video games
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WORKSHOP PLAN

1. Intro to video games, games as systems, and game design
2. In groups, make games that model intersecting social systems
3. Playtest other groups' games, reflect and discuss

Outcome: Understanding how social systems intersect by translating them into game mechanics

VIDEO GAMES 101

VIDEO GAMES

- Games that take place on digital platforms
- Many genres, from first-person shooters to puzzles
- Games cultures and the games industry = important part of understanding video games

VIDEO GAMES & FEMINISM

- Long history of discrimination in games (content, communities, jobs)
- Recent surge in pushback from critical voices
- Also recent surge in small-scale games that represent difference
- Reactionary attacks from online harassers

VIDEO GAMES AS SYSTEMS

- Many ways to define games
- Games as systems = games as interlocking rules/mechanics
- Rules determine what is possible, what actions results in what outcomes, and how power/value is exchanged.

All game systems communicate “values.” Conscientious game designers design with these in mind.

Critical game design = using game systems to reveal or challenge real-world cultural dynamics

GAME DESIGN 101

GAME DESIGN TOOLSET

- Experience goal = what designer wants player to learn or accomplish when playing
- Mechanics/rules = ways in which the player interacts
- Content/narratives = the story or theme overlaying the structural mechanics
- Playtest = player run-through of game in progress

Accessible digital game making tools: Twine, GameMaker, Kool Tool, Emotica, etc.

EXAMPLE: CANDY CRUSH SAGA

1. Match 3 or more of same kind, candies removed
2. Bigger combos or special candies = more points
3. Complexity added through board shape, limited moves, and additional abilities

System = network of factors



CANDY CRUSH COULD BE ABOUT...

Candy is a heuristic or “skin” on game mechanics. Skinning differently, it could be about:

- A drive toward accumulation
- Consumption
- Creating community
- Resource management

YOUR GAMES

INTERSECTIONALITY BRAINSTORM

Social factors, systems of power, and questions of identity...

GROUP DESIGN TASK: 15 MINUTES

1. Pick two of the factors listed on the board that you see as intersectional.
2. Tip: think about specific situations from your own experience.
3. Discuss: how could these factors be translated into mechanics?
4. Using any of the materials in front of you, design a game that models the interaction of these factors.
5. Write down your rules. Keep them simple and clear.

PLAYTEST: 5 MINUTES EACH

- 2 members of each group remain with their games
- 3 players move to another group's game
- As much as possible, let the game speak for itself

Playtesting tips:

- Players, narrate your thought processes
- Designers, watch for actions as well as words

GROUP DISCUSSION: 5 MINUTES

- Playtesters, return to your original groups.
- Those running the games, report on what you saw.
- What went as planned? What would you change? What did you want to communicate? What did you end up communicating?

Please pack up and return materials.

CLASS DISCUSSION