

Mantles in the Museum functionally disrupts the binary of museum insider and outsider as it is a group pedagogical experience that is not sanctioned or controlled by the museum yet does not violate any official rules provided to visitors to the museum. The disruptive aspect of the game can invite museum insiders to become immersed in the pedagogical experience of game play.

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## Whose Art Museum?: Immersive Gaming as Irruption

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**Abstract:** This paper introduces Mantles in the Museum, an immersive game that helps ameliorate student discomfort in art museums and to support discourse in, through, and around art museums. Within the game the students take on the roles of critics who use one of five interpretive frameworks, often differing from the student's own, to select works from a real museum to go to an international exhibition. Assuming these roles empowers students to be in the museum and to assess the works, students are given leave to engage in a vigorous critique process and to examine the art-world from a new perspective.

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## Introduction: Why would I talk about art?



Figure 1: Two players discuss a painting.

*She stands in front of an abstract expressionist painting, hoping she will not be required to speak about the work. She feels no enthusiasm for talking about a painting from 1950 made by a white man that seems to lack clear subject matter. "What did the instructor tell us about responding to non-representational artworks?" she wondered. Her mouth feels dry, and her palms are clammy with nervous perspiration. She wants to enjoy her first art museum visit, but it is challenging.*

When art educators bring secondary and undergraduate students to art museums, they often find students hesitate to engage in discussion about the works they see there. This paper introduces *Mantles in the Museum*, an immersive game that the authors designed to help ameliorate our students' discomfort in art museums and to support discourse in, through, and around art museums. Our racially diverse undergraduate students attend two public universities in two upper midwest post-industrial cities. They were raised in predominantly working class and lower middle-class households and over a third are first generation college students. Most of our students had not voluntarily visited an art

museum. Knowing this about our students, the authors examined existing research studying multiple dimensions of student hesitation and discomfort in art museums prior to designing *Mantles in the Museum*. Through our literature review we found these hesitations can arise from students' lack of knowledge about art, art museums, or the unspoken social etiquette of art museums (Christidou, 2016; Leahy, 2012). Students may also be experiencing psychological discomfort in art museums due to the differential in power between "visitors" and institutional insiders (including their teachers). Other sources of psychological discomfort can include physical or mechanical surveillance, the hospitality of front of house, educators or other museum employees, wayfinding signage, architecture that bears the "burden of nostalgia, dignity, and stuffiness" (Hein 2000, p. 19). Another important source of hesitation may be the students' increasing awareness of and concerns about art museums' exhibition and collecting practices. These practices have roots in western colonization, and, in many cases, art museums continue to exhibit artifacts and artworks acquired through colonization or whose content celebrates colonization (Jung, 2014). Despite these hesitations, art educators bring students to art museums with an expectation that their students will gain deeper or more meaningful connections to works of art. This expectation is often a forgone conclusion that does not account for the aforementioned facets of students' hesitations to discuss art and is predicated on socially conditioned assumptions that artifacts, works of art, and the institutions themselves have inherent universal cultural value to society.

A growing number of art museum staff and museum scholars are actively working to raise institutional awareness of the colonial and capitalist visual logics that form the bedrock of collection, exhibition, education, and public programming practices (Carlisle Kletchka, 2018; Murawski, 2014; Porter, 2014; Shanks, 2021). These museologists challenge assumptions about art museums' universal cultural value. These challenges to traditional

practices have been iterated through a noticeable increase in collection accessions of works by underrepresented national artists and international artists. Art museums have begun to acknowledge the difficult matter of deaccession or repatriation of artifacts and artworks with problematic histories or provenance indicating theft by colonizing groups. Some contemporary art museums circumvent the difficulties of navigating collections by becoming non-collecting institutions. Most of these non-collecting institutions and some collecting institutions have revised their curatorial practices to respond to public interest in making legible connections between exhibitions and the sociocultural milieu from which they arise and histories that inform or resist them. Museum educators can also lead the charge for institutional change. Art museum educators have broadened their approaches to teaching to extend learning beyond the expert monologue centered on an object. Dialogic and interactive learning has become commonplace in art museums (Christidou, 2013; Falk, 2009, Hubbard, 2007; Simon, 2010). Public programs in some art museums have also reflected a growing awareness of the importance to lay bare the colonial and capitalist aspects of the history and functions of art museums (Kundu & Kalin, 2018) through their efforts to host programs that are accessible to people outside traditional working hours, have no cost barrier, intentionally include accommodations for people with disabilities, and address topics that have broader social importance beyond highlighting aspects of an exhibition alone. This internal critique of histories and current practices in art museums by museologists as well as critiques from external scholars may result in institutional changes to collecting and preservation practices, curatorial processes, the aims and outcomes of education, and the potentials and limitations of public programming. However, this critique is often, as Shanks (2021) states, "not against the colonial and capitalist logics that undergird such museums. Rather...critique is directed towards visibility as such, which has created

and reifies these logics" (p. 61). Thus, internally driven critique does not repair colonizing history, but may interrupt museological practices in ways that can provide new models for people to view works of art.

The authors acknowledge these critiques and changes are worthwhile and may result in a wider array of people finding new connections with objects within these transformed art museums. As Choi (2016) states, "By acknowledging that subject/object/space in the museum is contingent and relational, we move away from reductive binaries to open up creative approaches to regard the displayed artworks as objects having imminent agency" (p. 80). Nonetheless, internal changes to art museums to date have been inconsistent and cannot immediately overcome the historical and ideological gravity art museums have come to represent. As such, the authors worked together for more than two years to develop and pilot a pedagogical tool that assists students in learning to engage in art criticism discourse in the art museum. Rather than echoing the work of museum educators, we approached the development of this pedagogical tool with an outsider's viewpoint in mind. We solicited input from our undergraduate students about the reasons they had been hesitant to talk about works of art or reluctant to visit art museums. Creating a disturbance to institutional insider expectations of typical art museum visitor behavior was also intentionally built into our pedagogical tool, both to empower students to share their perspectives and to address their concerns. The conversations we had with our undergraduate students about their ambivalence towards art museums or art criticism had a few common threads. Undergraduate students said they had infrequently been in art museums, often only as elementary school students, and frequently in short, docent-led tours that were not open-ended or conversational. Undergraduate students also expressed that they felt many of the artworks displayed in museums are either not works they could relate to personally or works that represent ideologies or cultures that they perceive to

conflict with their own histories and identities. With these conversations in mind, the authors reviewed research about pedagogical tools developed outside art museum settings. We drew from research in emancipatory pedagogies, game studies, process drama, and social theory to create Mantles in the Museum. Mantles in the Museum is an immersive game designed for undergraduate students to engage in art criticism in an enjoyable yet critical way while also problematizing assumptions some students had about art museums. Simultaneously, Mantles in the Museum functionally disrupts the binary of museum insider and outsider as it is a group pedagogical experience that is not sanctioned or controlled by the museum yet does not violate any official rules provided to visitors to the museum. The disruptive aspect of the game can invite museum insiders to become immersed in the pedagogical experience of game play. The fluidity of Mantles in the Museum is not a matter of coincidence, rather, it is an intentional aspect of the game.

The term immersive game, according to Murray (2017), is a metaphor derived from the physical experience of being submerged in water. Players seek the same feeling from a psychologically immersive experience that we do from a plunge in water: the sensation of being surrounded by a completely different reality. Mantles in the Museum facilitates another reality where meaningful discourse about works of art can happen without the same social risks of extemporaneous speaking. The game supports social learning for students who have limited prior knowledge of art history and art criticism as well as students with more experience with analyzing works of art.

## Immersive Games in Education



Figure 2: Players wearing a variety of costume elements during the game

*The jacket and accessories felt comfortable but different than her everyday clothes. They helped her imagine herself as F. Mavi, a scholar who wouldn't see just simple shapes and colors in the piece she was looking at but would be able to analyze the work using language that crossed barriers of time and space. While she had struggled to connect to expressionist works in previous classes, she knew that today she could be their champion. At least, for as long as the game lasted.*

Educational immersive games do not just simulate specific interactions, but also disrupt assumptions through the collaborative creation of an imagined reality that suspends everyday routines,

rules, and expectations. Play scholar Mary Flanagan (2010) tells us that playing immersive games and creating art spills over into our lives as experiential acts that abstract everyday actions into defamiliarized instruments. Through engagement with these instruments as a fantasy-self "other", Jason Cox (2015) holds that a player in an immersive game can envision a different standpoint (gender, ethnicity, sexuality) as a human possibility (Greene, 1995). As Martin Andresen (2012), a scholar on educational roleplaying, says in the educational *Bringing fiction alive* (p. 17), "Putting yourself in the mindset of another character, trying to see the world through their eyes, will often change your view and make you think differently, also on the topics of the real world." This engagement with a fantasy-self constitutes an act of *embodied arts-based inquiry* (Leavy, 2015).

Patricia Leavy's attributes for embodied arts-based inquiry include a key attribute that we took as our focus in developing the game: that practitioners are simultaneously a medium, an artwork, and researchers. Mantles in the Museum players exemplify this when they develop a costumed character, engage in semi-structured discourse, and gather and analyze data about works of art through interactions with other players and careful observations. Immersive games as embodied arts-based inquiry also allows players to reflect on the relationship between the beliefs of their performed character identities and their actual lives. As Eliot Eisner (2008) claims, "experiencing a situation in a form that allows you to walk in the shoes of another is to know one aspect of it" (p.6), meaning that the players are given the opportunity to perceive, understand, and value these counter-narratives. In presenting the potential of emergent counter-narratives, which is to say narratives that challenge established views with those that are inclusive and socially just (Desai 2010, in Whitehead 2012), it is important to note that playing a person from a different culture, race, or background in a game does not equate to a complete understanding of what it is like to live someone else's life, but rather that it

makes a space for relating to situations that are outside of a player's quotidian experience. According to Ayers (2004), the players enter with *knowledge, information, and experiences* that are specific to their identity, and because the character only exists as a simulacrum of these traits, they cannot know something that the player does not. However, they can switch to a different "frame" (Goffman, 1974) than the player's own, which may suggest different perceptions and reactions to situations. It is the tension between the player's primary frame and the assumed frame of their character that may generate a counter-narrative "to make visible that which dominant institutions render invisible" (Desai 2020).

The juxtapositions between personal narratives and the assumed counter-narratives provoke introspection and personal development that supports community building and enhances the potential of systemic change. In the words of Maxine Greene (1995) if "we can see our givens as contingencies, then we may have an opportunity to posit alternative ways of living and valuing and to make choices" (p.23). The emergent counter-narratives are interrogated by the players in a temporary *community of inquiry* that lasts for as long as the game does. According to Rita Irwin (2004) communities of inquiry act as a "site for weaving the personal and societal aspects of our lives together, helping us make sense of our lives and the lives of others" (p. 80) that disrupt our preconceptions to forge and reforge the meanings that emerge through their interaction.

The experience of interactions in immersive games is akin to John Dewey's (1934) "vital experience", an "interpenetration of self and the world of objects and events" (p. 246) that in this case encompasses both the quotidian and imagined realities of the players. This form of vital experience is interpreted through a cycle of inception, development, and fulfillment, and it does not limit the outcomes of the experience to those decided upon by the organizers prior to participant interaction, as is the practice for some educational role-play scenarios (Nickerson, 2008). In "Role-

playing games in arts, research and education” (2014), Cox says that role-playing facilitates “exploring and evoking unfamiliar ideas and emotions, including an understanding that identity is a shifting and intertextual construct” (p.383.) This shift in identity is central to the experience of Mantles in the Museum.

Equally essential however is the context in which play occurs during Mantles in the Museum, which is to say within a real-life museum. By juxtaposing a fantasy narrative over the frame of the museum, the game grants its players the opportunity to critique the structures that contain the works as well as the works themselves. As Miguel Sicart (2014) says in his book *Play Matters*, “Play appropriates events, structures, and institutions to mock them and trivialize them, or make them deadly serious. The carnival of the Middle Ages, with its capacity to subvert conventions and institutions in a suspension of time and power, was a symptom of freedom. Carnavalesque play takes control of the world and gives it to the players for them to explore, challenge, or subvert” (p. 3-4.) In this sense the museum becomes a true playground (Sicart, 2014, p.52), defined by the tension between the authority it holds in our world and the influence the players have over it within the narrative of Mantles in the Museum.

The distance that exists between the actual and diegetic authority of the players and the characters in Mantles in the Museum does not completely collapse during play, because the assumed experience of the latter is not integrated into the identity of the former. Effectively a player assumes the position of being both a student and that student’s “ignorant master”, a construct that according to Rancière (2004) is not defined by what they know but by their capacity to direct their students into the unknown. It should be noted that Rancière is suspicious of role-swapping in the arts, and that his suspicion is based on the forced diffusion of individual perspectives into a uniform and communal whole and on the basis that it lacks the disruptive potential that he feels art should embody (Rancière, 2004, Lewis, 2013). However he also

recognizes that spectating is an active process of interpretation, which within Mantles in the Museum is disrupted by dialog, inquiry, and reflection (Freire, 2005) and by encounters with works of art (Greene, 1995). This intertextuality combines with the game studies concept of “first person audience” (Sandberg, 2004), allowing for a view both from the player’s own eyes and those of the character’s whose actions they dictate. The character’s diegetic permission to do things the player would not gives them an “alibi” (Montola, 2010) to do as Lewis (2013) suggests for the democratizations of education: to rupture “conventional distributions of who can speak and think, what can be seen, and, finally, what can be heard” within a museum.

### Overview of the Game

*She and her classmate hit an impasse while they were in character. Where F. Mavi preferred tightly structured works, E. Karaka insisted that any work they sent to the exhibition had to create an emotionally moving experience. Fortunately, after some discussion they were able to agree that the Yayoi Kusama installation Infinity Mirror would satisfy them both.*

The background narrative structure that underpins Mantles in the Museum is that a group of art critics has been invited to a museum gala where they must together decide on three objects from the collection to send to an international exhibit hosted by The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Students use a character template to develop an art critic character for game play. Each art critic character template embraces an interpretive frameworks (Barrett, 2012) for evaluating and understanding art that guides their understanding and assessment of an artwork, and influences the kinds of work they will support for exhibition.

This game is designed for at least five players, takes about two hours to play, and requires the full game booklet and Mantle Character Cards, which can be downloaded for free at (website address).

Familiarity with some art vocabulary is useful because it gives the characters shared terminology, but an in-depth knowledge of the arts is not required to play. Players are also expected to do some light research about their interpretive framework before the game, and will ideally have at least one costume item (such as a special hat or coat) to help them separate their character's identity from their own. One person must act as The facilitator (typically the instructor), who organizes play, describes the game to players, and orchestrates the character-creation, in-character play, and debriefing sessions.

Facilitators may also play a character, generally from the Institutional framework. Mantles in the Museum is ideally played in an art museum with a diverse collection of pieces. Educators may choose to coordinate with an art museum so employees know you intend to play an immersive game with your students. The game can be played in other spaces, such as an art studio, as long as the space can be divided into at least three different areas. Additionally, the space requires no less than ten artworks to be on display in each of the three areas. You will also need a comfortable location to debrief in after the role-played portion of the game.

Most interactions in this game happen through a discourse between two or three characters, in which they describe their response to a work of art and the reasoning behind their response. This discourse develops shared understandings of the Interpretive Frameworks and how they might be applied by different people to different artworks. Players are reminded in the rules and by the facilitator that the purpose of the game discourse isn't to belittle a person, work of art, or ideas, but to consider how art is understood and valued from several different perspectives. People are more important than the game, and if at some point the interactions become more stressful than a player is comfortable with, they may opt out of the game. Opting out should not be challenged by the other players or the facilitator, though players may need to complete an alternative assignment if this is a formally assessed educational experience.

## Playing Mantles in the Museum

In this section we provide a description of how Mantles and the Museum is played and the underlying pedagogical and philosophical framework that supports it. The full game and character cards are available for free download at:

### Character Creation: Assuming the Mantle –



Figure 3: An example of a character card.

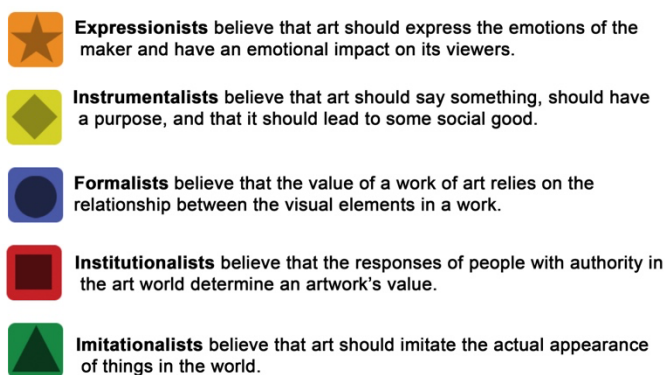


Figure 4: An example of the aesthetic framework card.

Before playing the game, players select a Character Card. The Character Cards provide a starting point for players to develop their character using one of the five Interpretive Frameworks: Expressionist, Formalist, Imitationalist, Institutionalist, and Instrumentalist. There are three color-coded cards per framework for players to choose to develop with a total of fifteen character starters from which to choose. The front of the card includes a character's first initial, last name, and occupation. The character's backstory is on the reverse of the card and provides cues on how they might express their Interpretive Framework.

The character details of the card provide several important effects. Firstly, they locate the Interpretive Framework within a specific context as opposed to a homogenous generalized one- the reasons two Formalists may have for selecting or rejecting a particular work may vary considerably. Secondly, they provide an anchor that allows the player to begin to develop an internal logic for the character, one that they can understand even if they do not necessarily agree with it. Lastly, according to ethnographer Gary Alan Fine (1983) it creates the foundation for a "dynamic social system" (p.80) wherein player agency is responsive not just to the structure of the game, but to external circumstance, and thus provides a "caricature" of extra-diegetic social lives that symbolize what is "real" through simplification and exaggeration (Coleman 1968, cited in Fine, 1983, p.7).

## In-Character: The Gala –

Mantles in the Museum takes place over three rounds of about half an hour each in three different galleries within the art museum. At the end of each round, one piece in that space is selected to be sent to the UNESCO exhibition. At the beginning of each round, facilitators identify a "Gathering Area", where all characters begin the round. In the first room, facilitators say "Welcome! Tonight we've been asked to select three works from the Museum to travel to UNESCO's upcoming International Exhibition. This represents a fantastic opportunity for us to get to know and learn from one another! I'm going to start with [indicating a work], but I hope to have a chance to talk to everyone tonight!" The Facilitator moves to the indicated work and begins a conversation with at least one character.

Players then seek out works to have conversations about in groups of no more than three people. At the end of a conversation, they mark one of the experience boxes on their name tags that matches the Interpretive Framework of one other character in the conversation. Players continue choosing works to have conversations around until all their experience boxes are full, at which point they go to The Gathering Area.

Once the characters have returned to The Gathering Area, the Facilitator calls for nominations for works. Once the nominations are in, the Facilitator calls for one person to make a thirty second pitch for each work and another to present any important counterpoints. The characters vote on which piece they will send. After the piece is chosen, they move to the next gallery and begin again. After characters have made their final determinations in each round for the UNESCO exhibition, facilitators review the choices and thank everyone.

The structure of critique and discourse in Mantles in the Museum serves both systemic and diegetic purposes. Because players advance the round by filling in the experience boxes they will encounter several different perspectives during the round, while



limiting the number of participants in a given conversation to three ensures that everyone will have a chance to speak without taking a longer amount of time than is practical in a round. Since the game requires a minimum of five players, there will always be space for at least two conversations to occur concurrently. This also serves diegetic purposes because if an instructor is playing in the game, they cannot be a part of every discussion, regardless of the role that they are in. Through the cycle of independent conversations and group discourse the players co-create what Lewis (2013) conceives as a “weird fiction”, a thing that “exists where and when it should not according to the logical distribution of things within a given order,” (p.66) by empowering students (rather than art insiders) to dictate what does and does not have worth within the museum.

### **The Debrief: Let’s Talk About It –**

In a Debrief, players begin to make sense of their emotions, transition from the game back to “real life”, and potential problems between players are addressed (Stark, 2014). The debrief takes place in a safe, comfortable space. Facilitators ask players to take a minute without talking to reflect on their experience. Facilitators then ask questions about what players learned about the different frameworks and from their characters about interacting with art. In addition to the reflective questions above, they may also ask:

- *Did your view of a work of art change?*
- *How did the way you think about other perspectives on works of art change?*
- *What is one thing about your character that you admire?*
- *What is one thing about you that you think your character would admire?*
- *In what ways (if any) has playing the game changed the way you think about the museum?*

Game designer Erik Fatland (as cited in Nilsen, Stark, & Lindahl, 2013) defines the debrief as “a tool

to foster an open, trusting, supportive culture among players”, and outlines its three primary goals: to validate each player’s experience; to translate the immediate experience and emotions into “lasting memories, reflections, and learning”; and to identify personal challenges a player experienced and to take steps towards solving them (p.15). Player experiences that are shared during The Debrief thus can be simultaneously an aesthetic experience, an opportunity for growth, and a vehicle through which they affect and are affected by the world. This potential is highlighted by Rancière’s (2004) claim that “everywhere there are starting points and turning points from which we learn new things, if we first dismiss the presupposition of distance, second the distribution of the roles, and third the borders between territories.” In The Debrief, players are provided the space to reevaluate their roles both in the context of the game and beyond as well as reconsidering physical and conceptual borders. These reevaluations can be emancipatory starting points or turning points for players as they consider art and art criticism.

### **Conclusion**

The authors created Mantles in the Museum to provide an accessible, meaningful, and dynamic resource to help young adults engage in art criticism in art museums. We set out to create a game that art educators could use, adapt, and incorporate into their teaching practices, and that empowers students to approach art criticism of contemporary works, abstract works, and works with political or cultural subject matter that they may otherwise have avoided. While the authors developed Mantles in the Museum primarily for young adults in secondary and undergraduate art education and art appreciation courses, the game has been played by adults of all ages in art museum settings during play testing with positive feedback from players. Mantles in the Museum was developed so it could be adapted for undergraduate and graduate art history or studio courses as well as being adaptable for art galleries

and community art organizations. Anecdotal feedback indeed indicates that players feel more comfortable with visiting art museums on their own following game play. The comfort secondary and undergraduate students experienced visiting art museums independently following game play suggests that players with prior familiarity with art museums and art criticism could also experience turning points in their critical examinations of art and art institutions following game play.

Relatedly, an emergent strength of the game however has been the increased capacity the authors have observed in their own students to lead the conversations that Mantles in the Museum provokes. This applies to conversations around art, as was originally intended by the authors, but also around the systems that govern how, where, and when we talk about art and the institutions that perpetuate them. When art education is reduced to explication, it becomes merely training in the modes of academia rather than thought freed from constraints. Overutilization of explication in teaching, according to Ranciere (1991), is the core of reproducing social inequality (p.6-7). This is particularly germane to the heavy emphasis on explication in teaching art criticism. Through a conscious rejection of methods of teaching art criticism such as overly didactic lectures in favor of an interactive game, students have sometimes been emboldened to question the game itself. These questions are what led to the successful iteration of Mantles in the Museum into its current form.

Mantles in the Museum was developed, tested, and initially played with racially diverse secondary and undergraduate students from predominantly working class and lower middle class households attending two universities and two high schools in two upper midwest post-industrial cities. The authors sought to develop a pedagogical means for these students to confidently inhabit art criticism and art museums. The current iteration of Mantles in the Museum relies on five western aesthetic frameworks and has, based on player feedback, disrupted the barrier of student discomfort with

critically discussing art. While this is not a fully irruptive result, the shifts in students' confidence in critical discussions about works of art and their interest in visiting art museums suggest there is additional potential for Mantles in the Museum. We encourage educators to explore how incorporating global majority aesthetic frameworks into Mantles in the Museum can help realize an irruption with an art museum. The heart of our process of developing Mantles in the Museum beat with questions about how we could develop a game that might emancipate both students and art institutions from the limitations of colonizing thinking. These questions have not been fully answered, but the fantasy narrative and game structure of Mantles in the Museum has affected our students and us. We urge art educators to continue to ask these questions as we believe pursuing them will have the same impact on the world that lies beneath that fantasy as well.

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