Online Videogames in an Online History Class

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Abstract

This study examines use of an online history simulation videogame, Civilization, in an online college history class. Overall findings were that the game complements texts and lectures, aids speakers of English as a second language, creates empathy for past societies, encourages personal research, and creates a sense of community in the online class.

1. Introduction

Videogames have been researched for their effects on children, but only recently has their educational potential been considered with any authority. A major work advocating the learning process involved with videogames was written by James Paul Gee in 2003 [1]. Many have built on his work. For the purposes of this study, the most notable is Kurt Squire.

Squire has been using the videogame Civilization 3 in after school programs with students at the grade and middle school level for several years [2]. This study builds on Squire’s use of Civilization 3 with a few variations. The first is that the game is part of the course curriculum, rather than an after school program. The second is that the students are in an introductory college history class for one semester, rather than a grade school or middle school for a whole year. The final difference is that the class is online.

2. Background

Civilization is a game first created by Sid Meier in 1991. There are now four versions, but the main interaction and basis of the game have not changed. Players begin with a settler in 4000 BC. They start a city and expand it, controlling taxes, trade, treaties, and technology research as they found new cities or conquer those of other players. One can “mod,” or modify, the game to model actual geography or particular historical scenarios.

The theoretical background of this study is constructivist, in that with Civilization students are able to build their own concept or knowledge of history through interaction with the computer and other students in their group. It also creates Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development, in that students, with guidance, can be pushed a little bit past their expertise and learn more by rising to the occasion.

This study was done in an online history class, Western History 1800 to the present, at a community college in the Spring 2008 semester. In addition to traditional assignments, students were asked to post weekly to the discussion board and complete a two part final paper project with peer review. There were two options for the paper: reading a piece of period literature as a primary source document or playing Civilization against classmates.

Students who chose the videogame option were asked to keep a journal of their thoughts and problems. The students were expected to become familiar with the game on their own, then play against other students in the class, and eventually play a time appropriate mod against other students. For this study I used a mod that mimicked the world and main powers in the year 1800. Submission of the journal was the first paper assignment. The second paper required students to reflect on the experience, critically examining the game and comparing it to lectures and readings. They were asked to discuss which helped them understand history more, and any biases in the game or the readings.

This project as initially envisioned had several goals. The first was to engage students in history in a way not possible with books or lectures, but in a way that can complement books and lectures. The second was to create an atmosphere of group learning in an online class. Oftentimes online classes are seen as independent studies, as modern day correspondence courses. The goal was for the online game to create a social network. I believe that the goals were measurably achieved with this study.
3. Methodology

I used qualitative methods for this study. I looked at papers, tests, discussion boards, and emails. It was also possible to interview two of the students who participated in the videogame assignment. I examined the transcripts of the interviews, assignments, emails, and discussion boards looking for common themes. Three common themes were apparent from the data: items that lined up with Squire’s study, impressions about the value of the project, and interesting themes not present in Squire’s study.

4. Findings

Nine students originally signed up for the videogame project, and six of them completed the course. All names are pseudonyms.

Lucy was one of two females in the group. She explained that the videogame gave her a better understanding of how history happens:

Instead of being concerned with events that happened I was able to understand the causes leading up to events. Playing the game along with reading the text and studying history allowed me to make connections between the two…. Instead of “this is how it was and that’s why this is how it is” the video game gave me personal control in how a civilization is formed and how it functions. The videogame allows history to become a more hands on class; which is something I did not think history ever had a chance at becoming. Lucy felt that the videogames and the other coursework were “two completely different approaches to history” which were valuable together. She indicated that videogames were valuable for students of all ages, preparing them for the future technological environment. Lucy added that it was a valuable assignment, but needs some sort of an in-person introductory session to help students understand how to play the game better.

Michael also learned a lot, and explained that the simulation allowed him to explore and learn. Saving and replaying allowed him to explore options not possible simply through a text:

Having a “redo” at your fingertips is true power. Without the ability to reverse mistakes the task of learning would be near impossible in this game…. The videogame helped me test out my own theories, practice my own total control tactics, and explore possibilities.

As with Lucy, he felt that the lectures and game gave two different ways of looking at and learning about history, and found it useful to compare the two.

Michael also noted the value of the mods, because they allowed one to understand how history happened. In addition, Michael mimicked a behavior seen in Squire’s study, going above and beyond the coursework to see if what was occurring in the game was similar to actual events. While the course focused on only western history, Michael investigated history of other countries, like India, to see if the game was historically accurate.

A group of Korean students, Isaac, Maud, and Kang, played the videogame against each other exclusively. They kept separate journals, but were allowed to do a final group paper that was substantially longer than that required of other students. To test the group play option, they played an American Revolution mod. During this experience they become emotionally involved in the history and plight of the actors:

We were able to realize how the English people felt back when they went to war against the American colonies.

They, like Michael and Lucy, discussed that this was a valuable experience when the game was mixed with the course content. Like Michael, they valued being able to replay to explore the results of different choices.

This group of students also brought to light two unanticipated ideas. As speakers of English as a second language taking classes in English, they may not always have total comprehension of everything they read, and therefore miss certain ideas. However, they were able to play this game using a Korean patch. The game for them was in Korean, which complemented the English text and led to greater comprehension. As Maud said in a personal email, this led to an “unforgettable experience.” They also noted that the game helped them see how history in different locations is related. History is often taught as national history: the history of France, England, and Germany. However, to realize that each of these nations’ histories occurred simultaneously and had some effect on the other is an important concept which students often fail to grasp.

The final student in the project was Robert, who has been playing Civilization for a very long time. However, he has never used the mods before, and was amazed at how accurate they could be. Robert also noted that the game can help one really understand the mindset of people, in a historically accurate, but not necessarily good way. This is similar to the thoughts of Isaac, Maud, and Kang:

What is eerily rude about this game is that you start to form this thinking process that is true to history. Ethnocentrism is prevalent when you travel to a place like Africa, to talk to someone like the Zulu,
who as I put it are “backwards society.” Of course this is how Europeans would of seen them at the time, and it is weird and fitting that that is how I would see them during the game.

Though the others felt that this game was best used in conjunction with texts, lectures, and discussion boards, Robert felt that this game was the way to learn history. This may be indicative of his past playing several versions of the game for many years.

5. Discussion

The first goal of the project was to engage students in history in a way not possible with books or lectures, but complementing these materials. As evidenced by the student comments, this project did convey the content of the class in an informative manner. The videogame and the book helped reach the students using two separate modes of instruction, seemingly leading to greater overall understanding of the content. They better understood the idea of macro history, and were able to better empathize with the way historical agents may have felt: the fear of the American colonists or the racial superiority of the colonizers of Africa.

The students who participated in this project spent twice as much time learning the videogame, playing against each other, and writing their papers than those in the literature project. Not only do I feel that the students did in fact learn history, but they were engaged enough to devote this extra time. I would argue they have learned history in a way that has made it real to them, and much more memorable.

The second goal of the project was to create an atmosphere of group learning in an online class. The students in the videogame project were frequently in contact with each other or myself via email or the discussion board. They contacted each other to set up times to play, and to discuss how to play. For the peer review part of the final paper, each student in the videogame project submitted a paper, and all but one gave feedback. For the literature project, five students were left in the group; only two submitted papers for peer review and each gave feedback. This seems to indicate that the students in the videogame group were more willing to share their papers and give feedback than those in the literature project. A greater percentage of students in the videogame group also finished the class, 6 out of 9 compared to 5 out of 13. Perhaps the students in the videogame project felt a greater sense of community or need to complete the course. These two findings should be explored further in future research.

This study also illuminated some unexpected issues that should be explored in future versions of this project. Students who use English as a second language felt more comfortable using this project, and felt that they learned more than had they not used the videogame. Students were also able to understand the idea that history occurs simultaneously. Finally, the feelings of sympathy with historical actors is interesting and deserving of more research. This study did highlight some similarities with Squire’s study, in that at least one student did independent research to compare the game to history. All of these factors need to be examined in future studies.

A problem raised with this study was the difficulty of becoming familiar with the game. Civilization 4 comes with an in-game tutorial, but even students using this version felt that an in-person session would be helpful. It may be fruitful to examine this option, or application in a blended or hybrid class.

This study should not be read as an argument for videogames as the only method of instruction. Students indicated that it was most valuable in conjunction with readings and lectures. This study illustrates that videogames do have a place in the online environment and should be used as an option for projects or perhaps as part of the curriculum. The game can promote understanding in multiple ways and force students to see history through another lens. This preliminary study shows that there is merit in examining this area of research. A second study will add weight to some of these findings and help us better understand some of the issues that were encountered.

This research was inspired by Squire’s Civilization studies, but was carried out in a different context with different goals. Some of his results were replicated in the new context, but there were other valuable findings that are unique to this environment. This game has fostered understanding with less reliance on English language fluency, created empathy for historical agents, and created a sense of community in an online setting. These provide interesting avenues for future research.

6. References

