Secret Societies of the Avant-garde: Designing a Game for Art History

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Abstract: Our design of "Secret Societies of the Avant-garde" (under testing Spring 2015 in a mixed mode course on Twentieth-Century Art) will demonstrate how using a serious game to teach art history not only fosters interactive learning, but models one of the most compelling artistic trends of the post/modern era as well. These models, the mechanics of the adventure game genre (puzzle-driven and informed by a sense of participating in a goal-driven narrative thread), and our knowledge of modern art inform the game's design. The game has five phases, during which students will play in teams and uncover and interpret artifacts from various art historical movements of the twentieth century. Working together, they will interpret primary and secondary sources including visual objects, letters, and essays, craft cohesive narratives for their objects that situate them within an avant-garde movement, and compete for clues that will help their team overcome obstacles.

Seed: Our Vision for "Secret Societies of the Avant-garde"

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Creating games that leverage the power of game mechanics to create transformative experiences are at the center of game development movements. As game designers and scholars focus on the ways in which games operate as spaces for exploration, critical thinking, and collaboration, games become increasingly significant as educational tools. The work emerging from the "Games for Change" and serious games communities is particularly helpful in addressing an apparent contradiction between games and educational objectives, as traditionally the idea of "fun" has fallen into a separate space from that of learning. Elsewhere, in the art games and electronic literature communities, game designers as artists are producing provocative works that explore the potential of games as experiential spaces: Zoe Quinn's *Depression Quest* places players in the role of the clinically depressed, Anna Anthropy's *Dys4ia* is a raw autobiographical exposure of hormone therapy and gender dysphoria, and Jason Nelson's flash games explore digital poetics. Genres such as electronic literature, a space for digital poetics and narratives with procedural and interactive components; interactive fiction, text-driven games composed with language parsers and object-oriented world models; and new media art further complicate the boundaries between games and other forms of interactive art. We seek to bring these convergent themes to the art history classroom, which has traditionally been a space without the intervention of experimental pedagogy of this kind.

Games are undervalued in art history teaching and learning. At the College Art Conference's annual meeting in 2014 there was one session on using games in the teaching of art and art history. Even so, the presentations were more interested in employing badges and gamification than in rethinking course delivery. In contrast, "Secret Societies of the Avant-garde" finds the game in the content. Games, play, and interactivity have had a significant role in modern and contemporary art movements including Dada, Surrealism, Fluxus, and Conceptualism. Artists have used play and participatory projects to challenge traditional media, to respond to political upheaval, and to instigate social change. From Cory Arcangel's video hacks to Theaster Gates's built environments to Andrea Zittel's sculptural installations, today's most compelling artists are blurring the boundaries between reality and hyperreality, between the personal and the societal, and between art and life. Our game's structure is based on the development and organization of twentieth-century art movements, models art historical research methods, and

illustrates historical contingency.

Our team is comprised of an art historian, a games scholar, and two student workers responsible for art history research and the implementation of game mechanics. The art historian, Keri Watson, specializes in modern and contemporary art and theory. Keri Watson has previously taught art history using Reacting to the Past and role-playing game strategies, and this project is in part an effort to bring interactive methods of the type used in small classes up to the scale of large lecture and mixed-mode courses. The games scholar, Anastasia Salter, focuses on narrative and expressive games. She applies lessons from these game genres to classroom challenges, and writes on games, pedagogy and technology in ProfHacker, a blog hosted by the Chronicle of Higher Education. This is the initial team for prototyping and deploying "Secret Societies of the Avant-garde" in Keri Watson's spring course.

Sprout: Our Prototype and Process

During the first phase of the production of the game, we deployed a prototype in the Spring 2014 iteration of Keri Watson's 20th Century Art History course. Students were broken into teams and engaged in critical thinking and the construction of thematic narrative through examining clues distributed in Webcourses, University of Central Florida's Canvas online learning platform. The course was delivered as a mixed mode experience, which means most of the student engagement with the game happens online, while the physical component of the course still includes traditional lectures as well as events for the sharing of student research and progress. However, students were first introduced to the narrative through physical letters distributed during the first lecture. Once students received this letter, the game has proceeded through the delivery of messages sent from "The Initiator" on Webcourses to each team. The avatar was designed by student developer Marcelo Laborda and has a painted design to suit the spirit of the game (see figure 1) and a logo for the society (see figure 2).

Figure 1: The Initiator

Figure 2: Secret Society Logo

Although this semester's test only involved a prototype, not a stand-alone interactive system, the game appears to be motivating students to engage deeply with the course's content. The first deliverables, 800-1000 word response papers in which students identified their objects and crafted cohesive narratives for their movements using the clues as examples, were of a high quality. The teams appear to be working well together and most teams demonstrate active participation on their discussion boards. Only one student out of sixty does not appear to be contributing. Moreover, the students who participated most actively on the online discussion boards are not necessarily the same students who contributed in the face-to-face class meetings, thus the game is engaging more students than a traditional lecture-discussion classroom format. One of the groups had trouble identifying the clues in the first phase, but they also demonstrated the ability to make interesting connections between their objects, because

they are not just "looking up the answers." By manipulating the images in future phases of deployment, we were able to replicate this experience for other teams.

Our initial concept developed as an alternate reality game, with the online portions of the class mediated not just by Keri Watson as the professor but by a separate figure, "The Initiator," who would bring students in to a narrative in which they needed to unravel the identity of a secret society of artists and prove themselves worthy to join. Designing the game overview was complicated by the need for deliverables that could be evaluated as a substantial part of progress in the course to clearly link the online activities to the learning objectives of the class. We brainstormed this initial structure to accomplish these goals and implemented it with modifications throughout the semester:

Phase One

Announcement to team from Initiator: Should include introduction to the society, a reminder that you are working with your team of pledges, and requirement to work using the discussion forum for phase one and prove your individual and collaborative worth through contributing. Will also include the first clue.

Clues: For first phase, all images will be pretty much unaltered. Materials should be added as pages in webcourses set to become visible on Thursdays, split between weeks based on the final due date. Deliverable: 800-1000 word response to the images with each clue identified, linking them all in a narrative or thematic thread.

Phase Two

Announcement to team from Initiator: Should include a reminder that things are going to get more challenging, and a riddle for each team that can be solved using information from at least two of the clues. This riddle will have a one-word answer that unlocks an additional clue, worth bonus points for its incorporation in the deliverable.

Clues: For second phase, some images may be altered. Materials should be added as pages in webcourses set to become visible on Thursdays, split between weeks based on the final due date. Deliverable: 800-1000 word response to the images with each clue identified, linking them all in a narrative or thematic thread. For phase two, including the identifying information and thematic link of the bonus clue (unlocked through the riddle) is worth extra points.

Phase Three

Announcement to team from Initiator: Should remind players not to forget the movements that have come before, and include a riddle for each team that can be solved using information from at least two of the clues in addition to a reference from a previous phase. This riddle will have a one-word answer that unlocks an additional clue, worth bonus points for its incorporation in the deliverable.

Clues: For third phase, all images should be altered or obscured. Materials should be added as pages in webcourses set to become visible on Thursdays, split between weeks based on the final due date. Deliverable: 1000 word response to the images with each clue identified, linking them all in a narrative or thematic thread. For phase three, including the identifying information and thematic link of the bonus clue (unlocked through the riddle) is worth extra points.

Phase Four

Announcement to team from Initiator: Should remind players not to forget the movements that have come before, and include a riddle for each team that can be solved using information from at least two of the clues in addition to a reference from a previous phase. This riddle will have a one-word answer that unlocks another riddle that points to a work not included as a photo: players must further unlock this riddle to figure out what piece they are missing.

Clues: For fourth phase, all images should be altered or obscured. Materials should be added as pages in webcourses set to become visible on Thursdays, split between weeks based on the final due date. Deliverable: 800-1000 word response to the images with each clue identified, linking them all in a narrative or thematic thread. For phase four, including the identifying information and thematic link of the bonus clue (unlocked through first completing the riddle, then following the second clues to identify the piece) is worth extra points.

Phase Five

Announcement to team from Initiator: Should remind players not to forget the movements that have come before, and include a riddle for each team that can be solved using information from at least two of the clues in addition to

a reference from a previous phase. This riddle will have a one-word answer that unlocks another riddle that points to a work not included as a photo: players must further unlock this riddle to figure out what piece they are missing.

Clues: For fourth phase, all images should be altered or obscured. Materials should be added as pages in webcourses set to become visible on Thursdays, split between weeks based on the final due date. Deliverable: A list of all identified works from phase five, in addition to the bonus object if successfully found. A 1000 word thematic description linking significant works from all phases, which will become the foundation for the final exhibit.

Final Phase

For the final phase of the game and initiation into the Secret Society teams must curate digital exhibitions that include works from each stage of the game and construct a thematic thread between the five movements they uncovered.

For later phases, we created videos and some audio files for the clues, rather than just posting image files. We are also bundled the clues rather than releasing them one at a time. In this way we can encourage the teams to make connections, not just identifications. We also planned to implement more changes to deliverables and variations in clue types, but found that student teams were more comfortable if we kept those elements relatively consistent throughout the semester. For future iterations, these changes will enhance the difficulty of the game and increase the amount of teamwork necessary to complete the tasks. In these ways, the phases will ideally become more challenging as the game progresses, thereby keeping players interested. The competitive nature of the game could also be enhanced by allowing more explicit interactions between teams.

In its current iteration the game features 500 clues that fit within fifty avant-garde art movements of the twentieth century. The game is played in five phases with each team of six students working through five artistic movements over the course of the game. Each team receives approximately ten clues per phase and in the final phase of the game they curate a digital exhibition of twentieth-century art that features their clues/objects/movements. The game is scalable in several ways. First, the number of players per team is flexible; one could envision teams of ten students. Second, more movements could be added; there are many movements and submovements that could be added to the game, as the twentieth century has no shortage of artistic experimentation and fragmentation. Third, the movements could be shuffled into different threads, so that teams would have other combinations of movements over the five phases thereby resulting in different final exhibitions. Fourth, more than one team could play with the same clues but still develop different deliverables because the players are different. In this scenario teams with the same clues could compete against one another. Finally, clues could be added and then randomly distributed so that any number of teams could play simultaneously. In this way the game has potential as a multi-player online game suitable for use in a massive open online course.

Bloom: Reflections and Looking Forward

This example reflects the first prototype of "Secret Societies of the Avant-garde," which was developed as a constrained game for implementation within a course management system. Ultimately, the course management system proved most limiting to the progression of the game, as the team set-up was very assignment focused and ultimately the Webcourses / Canvas platform did not lend itself to play. While student outcomes in the course were very promising, particularly as represented through the final gallery exhibitions reflecting the thematic unity of each team's society, we believe that the next iteration needs to provide more space for playful interaction, and particularly allow for both individual and collaborative work while experiencing the practices of art historians.

Building a game of this kind centered on the study of twentieth-century art offers the opportunity to benefit from and expose the playful and game-like practices already embedded in the work under examination. With additional refinement, we believe this game structure can supplement traditional art history pedagogy and allow students to critically engage while using discomfort and uncertainty as motivation for investigation. In future iterations, we intend to enhance the mechanics of problem-solving to ensure that students must move well beyond identification to develop their own narratives of art history while challenging their existing conceptions of genius and clear movement-based universal narratives.

References

Anthropy, Anna. (2012). *Dys4ia* [Online Flash videogame]. Newgrounds.

Quinn, Zoe. (2013). *Depression Quest* [Web Browser videogame]. Self-published.