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Cs the Day: The Trading Card Game

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Cs the Day: The Trading Card Game

Abstract

In many ways, *Cs the Day: The Card Game* is an ode both to academia, which is imperfect but can at times be wonderful, and to my personal passion and research interest, which has helped me to find a place within this profession. It is also, as is discussed in more detail below, an extension of an existing game, and as such embodies many of the same goals and principles of that game. Thus, designing *Cs the Day: The Card Game* required careful attention to how the mechanics and narrative reflect both the profession and the original game. There are certainly substantial critiques to be made about academia, and in particular the tenure process. Indeed, Way Jeng's "How I Learned to Love Despair: Using Simulation Video Games for Advocacy and Change," a tycoon-esque simulation game addressing the use of contingent faculty in English departments, does an excellent job of modeling how games can be used to critique academia. That game places players in the role of an English department chair and asks them to balance faculty loads (both service and teaching related), the department budget, and university goals. By doing so, Jeng creates an open space for academics to play with this system, in a way that encourages further critique and engagement with the ethics of dependence on contingent faculty. Thus, the play of "Despair" is transformative in that it allows us to "see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits" (Sicart 5).

Disciplines

English Language and Literature

Comments

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Wendi Sierra, St. John Fisher College

Introduction: Designing a Profession

In many ways, *Cs the Day: The Card Game* is an ode both to academia, which is imperfect but can at times be wonderful, and to my personal passion and research interest, which has helped me to find a place within this profession. It is also, as is discussed in more detail below, an extension of an existing game, and as such embodies many of the same goals and principles of that game. Thus, designing *Cs the Day: The Card Game* required careful attention to how the mechanics and narrative reflect both the profession and the original game. There are certainly substantial critiques to be made about academia, and in particular the tenure process. Indeed, Way Jeng's "How I Learned to Love Despair: Using Simulation Video Games for Advocacy and Change," a tycoon-esque simulation game addressing the use of contingent faculty in English departments, does an excellent job of modeling how games can be used to critique academia. That game places players in the role of an English department chair and asks them to balance faculty loads (both service and teaching related), the department budget, and university goals. By doing so, Jeng creates an open space for academics to play with this system, in a way that encourages further critique and engagement with the ethics of dependence on contingent faculty. Thus, the play of "Despair" is transformative in that it allows us to "see values and practice them and challenge them so they become more than mindless habits" (Sicart 5).

While such transformative play can be incredibly powerful, given the history associated with *Cs the Day*, I elected to represent the profession in a way that was fair but ultimately positive. Moreover, I strove to create a system that would invite players to play with the system itself, that would be open and easy to modify and customize. Doing so necessitated building a game that was reasonably simple and generalizable (thus leaving easy openings for customization and modification). Thus, prior to discussing either of these issues, the antecedents of this game must be explained.

Prehistory

As *Cs the Day: The Card Game* emerges from the context of another game, a fact that weighed heavily in the design process, it will be useful to briefly mention the history of *Cs the Day (CTD)*. *CTD*, currently the official game of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), began with a fairly simple goal: support new attendees and create a welcoming space within the conference environment. And, of course, if we could advance the visibility of games both as pedagogical tools and as objects for persuasive purposes, all the better. *CTD* has always been a conference game, looking for ways to highlight various features of the conference, encourage networking, and provide a welcoming home base for players. In all versions of the game players receive a booklet with a list of quests from quest givers at a table in the

conference space. As players complete quests they return to the table to document their completion and receive prizes.

The original version *CTD* debuted at the 2011 CCCC in Atlanta. This iteration of the game involved substantially more role-playing elements: players selected a career trajectory from Professor, Writing Program Administrator, or Publisher and received a specialized booklet of quests based on their choice. While some quests were generic and appeared in all three booklets, many were specific to the career path selected. Players leveled up after completing a number of quests, and each level up represented a new career stage- the Professor path went grad student, assistant professor, associate professor, full professor, for example. However, this aspect was quickly dropped both for simplicity's sake and to give more focus to the conference itself in the game mechanics. Regardless, it's worth noting that the pull toward a role-playing version of academia has its seeds in the very first iteration of *CTD*.

At the time of this writing the game has employed an informal gamified pedagogy for almost 10 years as a method of offering networking and professionalization support to conference attendees. The game has been explored and debated both in the academic sphere and in more popular venues. *Kairos* has published two pieces exploring the game, Jennifer deWinter and Stephanie Vie's (2015) "Sparklegate: Gamification, Academic Gravitas, and the Infantilization of Play", and Wendi Sierra and Kyle Stedman's "Ode to Sparklepony: Gamification in Action". *CTD* was even explored in a (somewhat infamous) *Chronicle of Higher Education* article, "Sparklepony' Quest Helps Break the Ice at a Scholarly Meeting." Either of the *Kairos* articles will be useful for anyone wishing to learn more about the history, controversy, and goals of the original *Cs the Day* game, however for the card game it is important merely to recall the focus on professionalization and orientation.

As mentioned in the introduction, *Cs the Day: The Card Game* extends that mission by taking one of the more popular elements of the official conference game, the trading cards given as rewards, and developing a multiplayer card game inspired by these cards (though not requiring the actual cards from the conference game to play). While the impetus for the card game derives from the cards handed out at the conference and contains many of the same types of cards, the specific cards included in this set are different, in order to accomplish a new purpose. The card game's representational elements depict the field of game studies; in its depiction of scholars, journals, conferences, and keywords; its mechanics represent the profession, in its depiction of various actions, interactions, and activities.

Representing the Profession

In *CTD: TCG*, players take on the role of academics in their first year on the tenure track. The resources deck contains cards with a mix of theorists, keywords, journals, publishers, and conferences. Each turn represents one year, and players attempt to complete actions that will secure "points" for their tenure binder. The winner is the player with the most points at the end of 7 rounds. Obviously, these mechanics are not a perfect representation of the tenure process at any school. Tenure is not competitive, many schools do not give Assistant Professors a full seven years

toward tenure, some of the activities depicted on the action cards are not weighted the same (reviewing for a journal may or may not count as service to the profession) while some actions are not even possible at some schools pre-tenure (take a research sabbatical, become department chair), and so on. Given the wide variation between institutions, departments, and tenure requirements, it would be a Sisyphean task to attempt complete accuracy in regard to the tenure process. Nonetheless, while the game makes no claims to perfect accuracy in its representation of earning tenure, I have striven to carefully consider the values the game would embody, and doing so use the game to model the ideals of what tenure should honor.

Mary Flanagan and Heidi Nissenbaum (2014), in *Values at Play in Digital Games*, make the bold claim that “all games embody values,” from simple card games to complex MMORPGs (multiplayer online role-playing games). Moreover, they highlight that ethics exist at all levels of game design, not merely in representational elements- “yet just as narrative and game rules carry values, so do lines of code, game engines, mechanics, and hardware” (p. 9). They thus call game designers to be particularly cognizant of how their works, intentionally or not, enshrine particular values. Flanagan and Nissenbaum introduce two important characteristics of values, claiming that they are 1) ideals we strive for, even if we do not/cannot attain them and 2) broadly generalizable or applicable in broad circumstances. My evaluation of game play mechanics for *CTD: TCG* was driven by these two principles.

Prior to discussing how the mechanics as designed hope to present a more ideal form of tenure, it may be useful to briefly discuss some of the mechanics that are not included, and how they violate the ideals I hoped to present, using Flanagan and Nissenbaum’s description. First, many players during both beta tests suggested including mechanics or cards that would represent non-academic events impacting a player’s academic performance (either positively or negatively). However, in evaluating these suggestions it was difficult to come up with a broadly generalizable way for “real life” events to integrate with the existing mechanics- every event could have a widely variable impact and nearly every event seemed to make presumptions about the character of the player that led focus of the simple narrative wildly astray.

Additionally, many players wanted the option to have more interaction with other players, positive and negative, during the game. Examples of this include a way to ‘steal’ actions, thus sabotaging a colleague, or a way to assist on actions, thus collaborating with a colleague. Creating cards or mechanics that allow for sabotage is a fairly simple prospect and is certainly one that commercial games in this genre use extensively. Further, while certainly not the norm, it would be hard to argue that there is no undercutting or negative interaction between colleagues in any department. Nonetheless, when thinking of Flanagan and Nissenbaum’s call to attend to all possible and plausible interpretations for any mechanic design the decision to leave those elements out of the game seemed clear (p.16). Thus, adding the potential for negative interaction to the tenure process seemed to violate the ideals about tenure I wanted to embody in the game.

So then, what ideals do the mechanics and representational elements hope to embody and depict? Much of this was brought into clearer focus with the addition of two card types not essential to the basic version of the game but provided with additional “advanced” rules.

The first additional card type is for scholar identity. This card gives each player an additional win condition- in other words a player is not eligible to win unless they complete the objective listed on the identity card. These cards are meant to demonstrate the variety of types of scholars and paths to tenure. Like the rest of the game, there is some level of fiction here. For example, Writing Program Administrators are not tenure-track/tenured at every institution. Nonetheless, the ideal these cards hope to strive for is the recognition of all types of scholarly work, from creating syllabi to editing journals to publishing articles, and to explore the various ways academics might choose to spend their energies.

Similarly, the plot cards introduce the role of the institution in the tenure process. While I choose to avoid dramatizing any particular institution or type of institution in the card game, it seemed important nonetheless to explore in some way the role institutional forces have in shaping any scholar's agenda. These cards are a mix of positive and negative effects, hopefully modeling how various forces in any given school can either support or challenge one's plans, particularly when the scholarly identity cards are also in play.

From a Pedagogy of Play to a Pedagogy of Production

Like *C's the Day* itself, *CTD:TCG* is grounded in the research on gaming and pedagogy, which suggests that learning is more effective and more powerful when it is playful (Gee 2008, Jenkins 2006, McGonigal 2011). Perhaps more importantly, however, is that *CTD:TCG* invites reader/players to become makers and game designers themselves, giving them the opportunity to craft and customize their own set of cards. Shifting players from receptive audience to active creators provides additional engagement and learning for players (Kafai and Burke, 2016). As I have argued elsewhere, "game creation involves two important acts: critical analysis of real world situations and systems and thoughtful reframing of those existing systems into persuasive engines of experience that convey messages using procedural rhetoric" (Sierra 68).

Thus, the blank set of cards is just as important, or perhaps even more important, than the set of games-focused keywords, scholars, journals, and conferences I have provided. Creating one's own set of resource cards requires both critical awareness and judgement: we can begin to ask not only which scholars, keywords, journals and conferences are important for a particular field or subfield, but also which are missing or underrepresented. How many female scholars are in the list? How many scholars of color? How many open access journals are included? Which topics does the keyword list center on, and which does it avoid? Kafai and Burke argue that one of the more beneficial traits of game design over game play for learning is that "making a game is a problem with an open end rather than just one correct solution; some might even refer to game making as a wicked problem since there is no right solution but instead an approximation of the end" (p. 33). There is no correct list of scholars, keywords, journals, and conferences to include in any given variation of the resource cards. Each decision for inclusion or exclusion requires thought and judgement. Looking at the shape of the final set one produces says as much (or perhaps more) about the person producing the set as it does about the field represented.

While creating one's own themed set of resource cards is the primary method of game creation/modification supported in *CTD:TCG*, the fact that this is a physical game rather than a digital game means it is relatively inconsequential for players to create their own identity, action, and plot cards as well. Likewise, players can easily create their own set of "house rules" that alter the values and ideals set forth in the published version of the game. Sicart (2104) argues that "play is a fundamental part of our moral well-being," precisely because "play frees us from moral conventions but makes them still present, so we are aware of their weight, presence, and importance" (p. 5). Thus, while the published version of *CTD:TCG* is neutral in terms of player interaction (neither cooperation nor sabotage are possible), player-creators can, indeed *should*, play with exploring what these mechanics would look like and how incorporating them would change the values of the game. Players could choose to set their version of the game at a specific institution or type of institution and alter the possible actions and/or point values based on what they imagine that institution would value.

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