

Teaching Somewhat Serious Games Matthew Durlington, Ph.D.

I will never forget the moment in 2014. It was a great theory class and the students were engaged in the topic. If we were going to design a game for the teaching of theory in anthropology what would we create? The carpentry necessitated that we all start naming our favorite games growing up. Aunt Gladys made sure that my favorite games were Gin Rummy and Poker. I also contributed Battleship, Clue and Boggle as games that I enjoyed but I quickly admitted that once Mattel came out with handheld electronic sports games, and the first Atari 2600 was released, my game time turned to screens more than board and card games. Maya Mehta shared that one of her favorite games was Cards Against Humanity. This is the moment. I then stated, “What is Cards Against Humanity?” At that point, the class began to relish the fact that I was turning increasingly red in the face as they described the game, the scenarios and the response cards that put friends in edgy situations that were also shockingly embarrassing to talk about. But, also hilarious and not safe for all situations. As described by its creators, “... Cards Against Humanity is a party game for horrible people. Unlike most of the party games you’ve played before, Cards Against Humanity is as despicable and awkward as you and your friends.” (<https://cardsagainsthumanity.com/>)

I am biased to the awkward moments in ethnography when anthropologists are put into sticky situations and ethical dilemmas. These moments are often the crux of fieldwork and their successful navigation can determine the success or failure of that endeavor. In addition, these often become epiphanies for the anthropologist and the reader. They are also great teaching moments. Why not move these uncomfortable situations and conversations into a game? Why not make Cards Against Humanity into Cards Against Anthropology? For the next several weeks we designed Anthropology Games and this teaching unit has become a permanent part of my curriculum.

For this iteration in 2014 we used the recently created Game Design Kit from MIT. (<http://web.mit.edu/mitstep/blogs/carole/2014/11/05.html>), an early comprehensive design kit that also comes with curricular components, cards and other support pieces. It was a great entrée into bringing game prototyping into the classroom. Since then the number of game prototyping tools has proliferated and we have into other curricular enhancements through mobile app prototyping tools (Collins and Durlington), and discussed how to integrate game design into apps (Savage Minds). Additionally, we have also ventured into speculations about mobile apps and ethnography (Anthropology Now).

Cards Against Anthropology premiered at the American Anthropological Association in Denver in 2015. I gave out 10 prototypes at a panel dedicated to gaming and anthropology ([link](#)) and also spread the word to the meeting through key colleagues and a new twitter handle @anthrocards that has since gained steady followers. The game is also free online (<https://www.anthropologygames.com/>) in the spirit of the Cards Against Anthropology creative commons license and open content ethos. In the last two years, the game has been played in dozens of classrooms, informal meetings and has been translated into another language. A superstar edition of the game will premiere shortly after the AAA meetings in 2017.

The game is played easily and puts players in the positions of anthropologists confronting ethical dilemmas in the field such as, “You are conducting fieldwork with suburban teenage heroin users and they ask you if you want to try it. What would you do?” Responses can range from, “Run.”, “Grab your iPhone.”, “Call your dissertation chair.”, “Smoke it.”, etc... Laughter often ensues, but serious conversations occur amid the frivolity. It is a serious game. Simply defined, serious games are games designed for other purposes than simply playing a game for entertainment where the objective is to have players consider different topics, some serious in nature. Games for Change continues to be a resource for serious games (<http://www.gamesfor-change.org/>). The concept and idea has gained so much popularity that it is a huge component of curriculum design, the subject of conferences and emerging centers in university settings. I have personally used the game Spent (<http://playspent.org/>) to discuss privilege, politics and economics in almost every class I have taught since learning about it from Anastasia Salter (<http://selflourd.net/>).

For the last three years, I have taught a capstone advanced writing course at Towson University in Anthropological Theory. The objective is to present current material in the field that is rife with ethical quagmires and emerging methodologies to prepare our students for anthropology in the 21st century. But, the angst of teaching the intellectual heritage of the discipline and social theory is always lurking in my pedagogical guilt. The solution? Gamify the old white guys of the field. Below are a few examples of student prototypes. It should also be explained that every class is told that all prototypes are developed for sharing with the world, are meant to be open content and that there will be no income generation. When students really engage this ethos, the work really shines.

One of our best graduates, Sam Shelton (@sam_tweets_now) designed the game “Would you Rather?, Anthropology Edition” (<http://www.samsheltononline.com/would-you-rather/>), for my Visual Anthropology course devoted to multimodal technologies and methods in the spring of 2017. As she explains the game:

“I chose to highlight my “Would You Rather?” game, because, frankly, it’s the part of the portfolio I’m most proud of. Working on the game helped me destress a bit as I was working to complete a whole medley of final projects, and that’s its exact point: to keep the anthropological wheels turning while also making room for a bit of fun in your day. Furthermore, I chose to present the game, because I thought it might be a nice change of pace for my classmates, who might be reeling from their own portfolio projects, and because gamification isn’t something academia gets to see all that often.

The medium of a game, especially one as open-ended as “Would You Rather,” means that I can incorporate dozens of unrelated anthropological theories, theorists and scenarios—Foucault, Berger, neoliberalism, capitalism, exotification—that would otherwise have no place together in the real world, in order to facilitate lively conversation between colleagues. Some of the scenarios are outlandish, but that’s the point. What’s an obvious decision to me might not be so obvious to someone else. The disagreements are what make the game fun. Maybe some of my classmates would actually rather be attacked by a literal bear than praise capitalism—who knows? Let’s find out.”

The instructions are as follows:

The game works best with three people, though the rules can be fudged according to your specifications if necessary.

DIRECTIONS

1. Each person starts off by drawing five cards.
2. For Player 1’s turn, Players 2 and 3 each select one of the cards from their hand to act as one of the Would You Rather? options.
3. Players 2 and 3 present each of their cards to Player 1 at the same time. They then both draw a new card to add to their hand.
4. Player 1 has to decide which of the two scenarios they’d rather experience. (For example: Would you rather be chased by a literal bear or have to defend the merits of a capitalist society?)
5. Player 1 chooses and says why they chose whichever option.
6. The group will likely then—hopefully—debate the pros/cons/”I would haves” of the options. Used cards are collected in a discard pile.
7. Repeat as necessary.
8. There is no winner. The winner is academia.
9. For added fun, make up your own options using some of the blank cards.
10. For even more fun, everyone (over 21 years old) has to take a drink whenever a “Take a drink” card is drawn. The card is immediately discarded, and the player who drew it draws another.

Perhaps the best pedagogical point is step 8, “There is no winner. The winner is academia.” Game cards are available here: (<http://www.samsheltononline.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ANTHGAME1.pdf>)

I wonder if sometimes I am helping shepherd a cadre of students looking to destroy anthropology or mercilessly mock it. But perhaps that is what we need as a field. We deal with very sober realities and often transfix those onto our collaborators when explaining our work

to our students. It can make the average undergraduate feel that every population they learn about is mired in a constant state of tragedy. There is tranquility and there is levity as well, even in serious games and serious situations.

Please visit my website for more game prototypes for teaching anthropology: (<https://www.anthropologygames.com/>)

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