Environmental Storytelling through Games Workshop Report

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The workshop was a grand success. Eight participants, including faculty from a number of different departments (Sociology, Biology, Studio Art, and Art History) as well as staff from Library and Information Services learned a great deal and were able to get a good head start on our individual projects.

To start, Dr. Anthony Masinton discussed the history of digital gaming, beginning with a simple game on an oscilloscope in 1958 to the most recent phenomenon of Fortnite. It was illuminating and entertaining and, for those of us that skew a bit older, rather nostalgic. What was perhaps most striking was understanding the pivotal role that gaming now plays in our culture. In terms of sales it dwarfs the combined profits of music, movies, and TV, bringing in more than double the net of all the other entertainment media. For the younger generation, they spend far more time gaming than watching TV, etc. This means that our students use gaming as a deep reference point that I am not sure of which many of us were fully aware.

Then we discussed, over the next few days, what environmental story telling was and how we could use it and gaming to teach students a variety of ideas. One participant was interested in creating a game without visuals, reliant only on sound cues to move about. Another was interested in combining molecules and how the correct or incorrect placement would lead to different consequences. Another was interested in showing the history of some Mount Vernon houses from the front doors (where the wealthy lived) and from the back doors (where the servants, usually African-Americans from the south or immigrants from Europe) lived and worked.

Interwoven into these conversations was learning the basics of creating three-dimensional spaces using a variety of software including Unity, Agisoft Photoscan, and Metashape. Anthony created a space for each of us to experiment with and to begin to understand the complexity involved in making our ideas come to life. To be honest, we understood how we had just begun our projects and that completing them will take a great deal of time and thought. The technology is still the province of specialists and those of us who have the patience to battle it to make it bend to our will. Like early versus current word processing, we know it will continue to get easier and more intuitive as time goes on. Nonetheless, most of us are determined to finish our projects. Some have already formed partnerships with some of the more technically minded of us to help the less technically minded. A bonus for all of us was to get to know our colleagues much better and have a greater understanding of their interests and goals.

Anthony was a perfect teacher. He kept our attention and interest over three long days (9-4 each day) through a carefully planned series of exercises, discussions, lectures, and breaks. He worked with each of us individually and even created forms for our particular projects overnight. He was congenial, enthusiastic, and fun. Over lunch and on breaks we discussed projects, storytelling, and issues such as digital accessibility.

The computer classroom in the Horvitz Studio Art building was perfect and LBIS installed all the software we could need. When there were hiccups, the computer folks taking the workshop did trouble shooting. The food, provided by AVI was delicious and, I think, everyone was happy.

The anticipated outcome suggested in the grant proposal was the following:
A heightened interest in this form of storytelling which should enhance the work of the students and faculty. With luck, it will make them reexamine how and why certain things appear near

each other visually and will inspire them to either use them as a prompt or create their own visual prompts to tell their own stories.
I believe we achieved the beginning of that. This is the kind of learning that requires rumination and review. I know that people are already planning on incorporating some of these ideas into their work and approach to their work. We have not (yet) created whiz bang games of our own yet. The complex technology makes that kind of production impossible during a short time span, especially for the beginner, but the ideas and approaches have been planted and I know they will grow into something fascinating.