

Transcript: Foreword, Season 1 Episode 5 “Gaming”

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Episode Title:

[Alison] Welcome to a new episode of Foreword, a podcast where we meet researchers from Brock University’s Faculty of Humanities. I’m your host, Alison Innes.

[Theme music]

[Alison]

Like most people, you might be playing a lot of games these days. Board games, video games, or games on your phone. But have you thought about how those games communicate meaning? I spoke with today’s featured researcher, Dr. Jason Hawreliak from Brock’s Centre for Digital Humanities, about how games communicate meaning and propaganda. Listen on to hear more about Animal Crossing, Call of Duty, and the field of game studies.

Joining me virtually today is Dr. Jason Hawreliak, Associate Professor with Brock’s Centre for Digital Humanities, where he teaches in both the Game and Interactive Arts and Science programs and is currently the Centre’s Director. Jason holds an MA in English and Film Studies from Wilfrid Laurier University and PhD in English from the University of Waterloo. His research interests have included heroism and immortality in videogames, multimodal rhetoric, and the psychological function of digital media. He has joined me today to talk about his research and his 2019 book *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames*.

So welcome!

[JH] Hey Alison, thanks for having me!

[Alison] I am glad you could join us today. So you have a background in English, which we might associate with studying things like, I don’t know, Dickens, Jane Austen, that kind of thing. What is the connection between studying English and video games and kinda, what drew you from English into digital media?

[JH] Yeah, so that’s a good question. I was initially interested in post-colonial literature when I started my PhD, um, and I’m still interested in that, but as I went through my coursework, I took a really important course on propaganda, and in that course we were given lots of flexibility with objects of study and I’m somebody who’s been playing video games my whole

life and at the time there was this “Call of Duty: Modern Warfare” franchise, which is like a first-person shooter video game, and it occurred to me that it was very much an example of pro-US military propaganda, where the players are encouraged to not only kill terrorists, but the narrative frame of the game really, I think, valorized military intervention in Afghanistan and kind of the Middle East in general. And so I looked at some screenshots from the game and they really tried to make it quote-unquote “realistic” as possible in terms of how the weapons look and sound and kind of the different, even some of the tactics that you have, but they didn’t focus on realism when it came to some of the obviously negative consequences of war. Like in the game if you die, you just get back up, and while you are a hero in the game, it doesn’t really look at what happens after combat. It was this very sanitized, heroic version of war, and that’s very popular within video games of course. And so I looked at that and asked the prof if I could write about that and he said yes. The relationships between English and Game Studies is really that an English degree prepared me anyways with the analytical tools I needed to interpret media. So how do I pick something apart, whether it’s a Shakespeare play or a poem or a video game, how do I pick that apart and look for different ways meaning is conveyed. English is also great for teaching you how to build arguments using textual evidence, something that we’re in sore needs of these days [laughs] going to the text and finding evidence to support your argument, so sometimes people think that humanities is, well, it’s all subjective, and to an extent that is certainly true. But the way I approach it and what I try to tell my students, is that if you have some kind of evidence to back up your argument then you’re usually in pretty good shape. So even though the, a text, a written text, is certainly different from a video game text, there is some overlap in how you can apply interpretive and analytic tools.

[Alison] Game Studies itself must be a relatively new field, I suppose. Can you tell us a little bit about what Game Studies involves?

[JH] Sure. So yeah, you’re right, Game Studies as an academic discipline is probably something like 25 years old, the mid-90s I would say, even up to the late 90s and early 2000s, is when it really started to catch on as an academic discipline. Even now, if you look in Canada, there is only a handful of academic programs which are focussed on games, and even then they are often focussed on the technical aspects, like game development, programming, 3D modelling, animation. So Game Studies is fairly new. Game Studies just in general looks at games and gaming culture, so the people who play games, and researches it from different fields. It is inherently interdisciplinary. So my background, as we mentioned, is in English language and literature and Humanities, but certainly people analyze games from cultural studies perspectives. Right now one of the dominant trends is ethnographic research, so interviewing people who play games and asking them their habits and try to figure out that way. Anything surrounding the business of games, the industry. Another prominent topic right now is what’s called crunch in the industry, and that’s basically where workers are encouraged if not required to work long hours like 60, 80 hours weeks regularly. So Game Studies is really broad. Basically if you want to study games or anything kind of surrounding games, then you’re in. Within psychology obviously a lot of the early work was in aggression, you know does playing violent

video games make you violent, and now it looks at how games can actually be helpful for mental health and wellbeing. So Game Studies is this really broad category, like many disciplines, nobody is really sure where that line is, what counts as Game Studies and what doesn't. That said, although the discipline of Game Studies is new, people have been researching play and games for decades, if not centuries, for a long, long time, but not in a really formalized way as an academic discipline like we see now.

[Alison] You recently had a piece that you had co-authored in *The Conversation* about the role of video games during this pandemic and the interest in *Animal Crossing*. Did you want to say a few things about that?

[JH] Sure. So we're seeing, not surprisingly, video game sales spike during this pandemic. People are hopefully staying at home and video games are just a great way to not only pass the time and kind of escape for a bit, but also to connect with other people. So of course many games now are online where you can meet up with friends or play with strangers from around the world. *Animal Crossing* has done just phenomenal numbers with their sales. So what's really impressive about *Animal Crossing* is that it's only for a single platform, Nintendo Switch. For those who aren't familiar with the game, it doesn't sound like much, [laughs] on paper, but you basically have your own little piece of land, so like a little island, and you are given a mortgage up front by Tom Nook, and much of the game is really just trying to pay off that mortgage by doing menial tasks like fishing or, um, selling turnips, or whatever, and you can buy, you can upgrade your house, you can upgrade your clothes, you can build bigger houses, and so it's this kind of strange concept, but it's all wrapped in this really cute aesthetic, it's simple to play and it's just kind of this calm relaxing experience to play, so I guess it's no surprise it's really popular right now. In *The Conversation* piece we were, we noticed this trend early, we noticed that game developers were actually putting a lot of their games on sale or giving them away for free or trying to do what they could to help, I guess, so we just kind of tried to talk about the different ways playing games can help people connect, pass the time, and it was a little bit of an interesting piece to write, because traditionally I'm used to defending games, and there's a lot of conversation about how they're bad for you, how they promote a sedentary lifestyle, all the aggression discourse I already mentioned, and now I think it's becoming much more clear that there are actually really positive benefits of games as well.

[Alison] You had a book published just last year on *Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames*, and I'm not familiar with probably half of the words in that [laugh] in that title, or I certainly couldn't give a good definition of them. So I was wondering if you could unpack this for me, and kind of explain what those big words mean? [laughs]

[JH] Yeah, really rolls off the tongue, hey? [laughs]

[Alison] It sounds very educated! [laughs]

[JH] Yeah, well I'll give a little inside baseball on how academic titles work. So, what typically happens is that there will be a clever title, ah, and then a colon and then what follows the colon

is what the book or essay is actually about. So, as an example, um, I delivered a presentation on games that use smell, like the sense of smell, called Games that Stink: A Theory of Olfaction-- which is sense of smell--In Video Games. So a very standard title. I'm awful with titles, I have no art when it comes to clever word play so I just kind of put this tentatively for the publisher, Multimodal Semiotics and Rhetoric in Videogames, which was going to be what was after the colon. By the time I finally figured out, [laughs] a decent title, it was kind of too late, and the publisher was like, we've already put this on the books and told libraries about this, sorry. So that's how it came to the title. So what it means is, the book is basically about how games communicate meaning. Multimodal semiotics refers to a branch of semiotics, which itself is concerned with how meaning is conveyed, um, so examples of a semiotic modes are like speech, text, image, and music, they're just basically different ways you can communicate meanings. So we're talking right now primarily through speech and the auditory modes. Even if this was done through video, then you would have some visual content as well. So those are semiotic modes. So multimodality looks at how all those modes fit together and how they work. A really good example of multimodality is if you've ever watched, I'm sure you have, a horror form, well what's happening on the screen can often be pretty scary, but what really makes it scary is the music that accompanies it.

[Alison] Hmm-mmm.

[JH] So if you ever mute the sound of a horror movie, like automatically a lot of the emotional resonance, a lot of the fear that comes from watching, goes away. Likewise, if you replace the scary music with something really silly, it kind of changes the meaning of what you're seeing on screen. So just kind of how all these different ways of communicating come together. And rhetoric is just about persuasion. I take a really very kind of classical view of rhetoric where it's about how do you convince people into certain attitudes, world views, and actions. So what I was really interested in the book was how do games use all these semiotics modes available to them—and games can use a lot of them—and how do they use that to create persuasive messages. This work came out of my dissertation where I was interesting in propaganda in games. I had some lingering questions at the end of this dissertation. Ok, so I'm saying that games are propaganda but I haven't really answered the question of how the games are producing propaganda at a semiotic, mechanical level. So this book was kind of a way for me to answer that question. The goal of the book, though, wasn't just to talk about semiotics and rhetoric in games, it was really to try to bring together a couple of disparate fields that is multimodal semiotics and game studies, which somewhat surprisingly haven't interacted that much. And because games have so many different semiotic modes available to them, you know, there's images, and music and sound effects, and text, it was kind of surprising to me that there hadn't been a book like this before. So part of academic work and research is finding a niche and kind of seeing what's not out there and trying to fill that, so that's what I was trying to do with the book.

[Alison] So you open your book, your introduction, with the example of Civilizations, which is a game that has been around for a long time now I guess in gaming terms. I remember playing a very early version of that game myself. So how does a game like that express social, cultural, and ideological values? And how much of it do you think is intentional?

[JH] Intentional is tricky, um, maybe I'll talk about that in a minute. For the values and ideologies that are inherent, the game Civilization basically has you start in something like 4000 BC where you are, you have, you know, very little technology and you kind of build up your civilization over time up to contemporary times and into the future a little bit. So you go through, you know, agricultural production, um, you know, metallurgy, different technologies, but also different social and cultural movements. So at some point you can institute Catholicism into your civilization or something and that has certain benefits. So the game really has this inherent rhetoric of progress which closely matches what sort of happened, certainly in the western world, I'd say, where it makes the march of history kind of seem inevitable, like this was a natural way for things to happen, Of course we went through a period of no religions devotion, of course we went through a period of military expansion, and that's just stuff that happens in a civilization. It doesn't really question any of that. Some other ideological assumptions are that there are, early on, there are enemies called barbarians. So obviously that's a charged term to being with but these are basically depicted as irrational, violent people who you can't really negotiate with. You can negotiate with the other civilizations but you can't negotiate with barbarians. You just kind of have to kill or be killed. So I think that as a lot of people in game studies have noted, there's this very settler-colonialist rhetoric inherent in Civilizations games. Now whether that's intentional or not, my guess is probably not, but that in a way is just as bad if not worse than putting these things in intentionally. When it's not intentional, what it demonstrates and highlights is how these values are just so deeply ingrained that people don't even thinking about them, they're just quote unquote normal. So that's, Civilization I think is a really good example of how values are just embedded into the game, whether they're meant to or not. Other examples again are like the military games. I remember being at a conference years and years ago and talking about how these Call of Duty games are basically pro-US military propaganda and it just so happened, it was actually at the immersive world conference at Brock in 2009, and it just so happened there was somebody who worked on the game in attendance and they said, well, I worked on this and we didn't intend it to be propaganda. And I'm sure they didn't, but again coming back to my English background, the text is the text, what is in there to me is paramount, not what was intended by the developers. So something else that is important to note is that when you're working in game development, especially for these big budget games with teams of hundreds of people and they cost millions and millions of dollars to produce, oftentimes the work is very segregated. So you might be a 3D modeller who just works on a, I don't know, the way the guns work. So you're not really thinking about the whole picture, you're just, that's your job, to make sure that the guns all look realistic and good, and that's that. So it's game production is this interesting realm because there is so much that goes into a game—there's art and sound and

narrative and programming obviously and more—that most of the time you can only relate to your one small part. So the kind of ideological messages or big picture messages aren't always apparent to the people working on them. They're not even apparent to the people who play them. One of the really kind of sinister things about propaganda is that it works best when you don't realize it's propaganda, when it's just kind of normal. So that's how I see the relationship between ideology and games. Now is every game political and is every game ideological? Some would certainly say yes. I think that when you're looking at abstract games like I don't know, checkers or chess or something like that, it's not as readily apparent, but certainly when you're depicting people and countries and systems then it is always inevitably going to be political text.

[Alison] So then this is where it kind of connects with some of the controversies we've seen in the gaming community and the need for diversity of people creating and analyzing these things?

[JH] Yes, exactly, and I think that is really important. There are two sides to the diversity question, two main sides. The one is representation on screen. So, for a long time, especially within the first person shooter genre, most of the playable characters were white guys, and they were all you know, had chiselled jaws and they all had this stereotypical macho view of what a soldier should look like. That's certainly getting better now, but representation even if you have diverse representation on screen, that's great and necessary, it's actually kind of a low bar to hit. What we really need more of is diversity in the workplace, so there's a survey that's done every year through the, I think it's the IGDA, International Game Developers Association, I believe, they do a survey every year where they look at things like demographics of gaming studios, and it's still pretty miserable. I think it's still about three quarters of the industry identify as male, and when you look at the breakdown in terms of ethnicity and sexual orientation, it's even worse. So, the industry has a long way to go in terms of diversity, not just in what's on the screen but in the workplace as well.

[Alison] I want to come back to something that you mentioned earlier about game studies and the technical and looking at the, um, the technical side and the game and gaming culture side. How do the programs you're involved in, Interactive Arts and Science, and the Game programs, how do they bring together both the technical side of games and that gaming culture side for students.

[JH] Well I think a well-rounded education in game design and even game programming requires both sides of that. So our kind of philosophy at the CDH is that theory informs practice and vice versa. So to use me as an example, I come from a very, kind of traditional Humanities background in English and Film Studies, but I make little games, I try to use Adobe products, I try to use the tools that my students use, so I can either teach them in introductory courses or kind of help them when needed. Now luckily they don't come to me a whole lot for the really technical problems but it's actually really useful for me as a researcher to know how it works when you're making games. What are the steps involved, what's possible, what's not possible.

So we find that even for the Game program, which is very technical, it's joint with Niagara College, they do a lot of work with tools, 3D modelling software, animation, programming, working in game engines, um, even for them it's important for them to know some of the broader contextual issues like representation in games, um, like labour issues in games, how to conduct good game criticism. So one think that we found talking to industry is that for interviews for game design jobs, they kind of ask you to critique a game often, and not just critique it but say here's what I saw and here's how I might improve it or here's how I might change it. They're asked questions in interviews where it really tests their critical analytic skills. So even for those who are interested in purely technical jobs, it's really important to have those broader competencies that can provide some context to what they're producing. I think that the students in Interactive Arts and Science who receive a little bit less technical instruction, although they certainly receive some, they're usually more interested in studying for example what's the impact of ubiquitous social media on the human condition. So Interactive Arts and Science is a bit more of a Humanities based program, but they're certainly still learning about the tools that they interact with, so they're learning some mobile app development, interface design, 3D modelling, even some digital film production.

[Alison] And I'm drawing a bit here from my own experience before I started working with you guys and understanding what you guys do. Why should someone who doesn't really play video games care about video games and care about what is being done in this digital space?

[JH] Sure. So, one honest answer is that not everyone is interested in video games and that's ok. There's plenty of other worthwhile activities, and in fact I wish people who played games a lot would read books too and watch films and knit, whatever [laughs] do other things too. But I would say when we talk about video games it's important not to just think about them in terms of these of huge blockbuster games, these really violent and fast-paced games, you know if you play Candy Crush on your phone or you play Words with Friends or Scrabble online or whatever, that all counts. So games are really this ubiquitous form. Not that that's necessarily an important reason, but they're a huge economic juggernaut. Depending on where you look, they're certainly north of 100 billion dollars a year industry globally, and I've seen estimates for next year that like 120, 130 billion globally. Just to give you some context, I think Hollywood is around, um, you know maybe like a quarter of that, or a third of that. So there's really this economic juggernaut. Even within Ontario, I think the last report I saw, there were 20,000 jobs either directly in or spin-off jobs in the interactive media industry in Ontario. So it's big for that reason. But I think also play is really important. Like we all need to play, whether it's a video game or it's playing with your friends, like Dungeons and Dragons, or you know whatever it happens to be, sports, play is really a fundamental aspect of human life and especially now I think it's really important to engage with play. So I think that even people who aren't interested in video games and even within Interactive Arts and Science there are quite a number of students who aren't interested in video games, it's still a kind of a fundamental part of what it means to be human, and in fact, not just human, because we know that animals play too. If you

have dogs or cats they like to play as well. So it's this really fundamental part of life and for no other reason than that I think it's worth exploring, worth being interested in.

[Alison] Thank you very much and enjoy your long weekend.

[JH] Thanks, and you too Alison.

[Theme music]

[Credits]

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