May-2013

Academic and Non-Academic Games

Bjorn Ingvoldstad

Bridgewater State University, bingvoldstad@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/br_rev/vol32/iss1/7

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
TOP 1
Late August, for us baseball fans, means a pennant race— if we’re lucky. (This past year, Red Sox fans – not lucky.) But let me tell you, growing up as a baseball fan in the American Midwest, seasons are too often a perennial exercise in quiet desperation. So, a little success goes a long way: everyone’s ball club should win the championship once. Really. Once all is need. For the rest of my life, I’ll remember October 1991: running up to the Metrodome after the Twins won that 10-inning Game 7 over the Atlanta Braves, high-fiving random motorists trying to join the celebration.

BOTTOM 1
Late August, for university professor, means syllabus (re)writing. Time to revisit familiar classes, or perhaps craft a new one: what students will read when, how much this or that assignment will be worth, how many absences can occur before it gets ugly, etc. Once I can articulate a series of objectives and outcomes, I go about creating a calendar, teaching seminar turns out to be a fantasy baseball league–we all load our scores onto Blackboard and follow the standings. Grades. Whatever. Or maybe gaming studies is an emerging sub-discipline within media studies. Indeed, the first honor thesis I’ve advised was on the emergence of the casual gaming industry, marked by mobile devices (Angry Birds, anyone), motion-sensor enabled consoles (e.g., the Nintendo Wii), and the like. My student, Zach, went so far as to loan me a Sony Connect console over winter break–for background research! And I tell you: the technology is dangerously fun. Left to my own devices, I might spend far too much time for my own good playing these videogames. I’ll just have to settle for a game of Tetris after I finish this sentence.

TOP 2
When I was a boy, all I ever wanted to be

against our research projects, anxious about graduating, anxious about their career trajectories after graduation. No more random rolls for wolves—the “real world” will toss any number of challenges at our students. It already has! And yet here we all are—marking our successes individually and collectively.

BOTTOM 2
I taught Global Cinema again last fall. This time, it was entirely online, which allowed me to empower students to customize their learning experiences. So, for instance, in our unit on national cinemas, we began a shared curriculum of films: Potemkin, Rashomon, Rules of the Game. Then students picked a national cinema they wanted to study in more depth and developed their own individual reading and screening schedules. This kind of flexibility would simply be impossible to facilitate in a more traditional, face-to-face learning environment.

TOP 3
In fifth grade, I got a board game called Stats-Pro Baseball. This game had cards for hundreds of different players, their statistics boiled down to usable sets of probabilities for pitching, hitting, fielding, running, and so on. As a kid, I loved playing this game but when I returned to it as a teenager, things got really interesting: several friends and I drafted players to play out abbreviated (60-game) seasons. We played every weekend. We kept statistics. We wrote news stories about our games. We were obsessed in the way kids can be before they start to discover dating and jobs and cars—the other parts of a balanced life.

BOTTOM 3
My wife of 13+ years and I have been having a conversation about life balance for, oh, at least the past 13+ years. How can I do everything that I need to do career­wise, while still having a full and fruitful life? I think all of us wrestle with this question of balance, and the other parts of a balanced life.
TOP 1
Late August, for us baseball fans, means a pennant race—if we’re lucky. (This past year, Red Sox fans = not lucky.) But let me tell you, growing up as a baseball fan in the American Midwest, seasons are too often a perennial exercise in quiet desperation. So, a little success goes a long way: everyone’s ball club should win the championship once. Really. Once all you need. For the rest of my life, I’ll remember October 1991: running up to the Metrodome after the Twins won that 10-inning Game 7 over the Atlanta Braves, high-fiving random motorists trying to join the celebration.

BOTTOM 1
Late August, for university professor, means syllabus (re)writing. Time to revisit familiar classes, or perhaps craft a new one: what students will read when, how much this or that assignment will be worth, how many absences can occur before it gets ugly, etc. Once I can articulate a series of objectives and outcomes, I go about creating a calendar, something that I hope will keep students on track through the semester. Essentially, I want the syllabus to say: Here’s what you need to do in order to succeed, and this is what you can expect to learn along the way.

TOP 2
When I was a boy, all I ever wanted to be when I grew up was a baseball player. The problem: I couldn’t hit, couldn’t throw and couldn’t catch, and I could barely run. It was a nice idea, but nothing with which my career-counselor mom could work. At some point, near the end of my undergraduate years, I hit upon the idea of teaching film from around the world. Was it possible, I asked my favorite Spanish professor, Severin Irvin, to teach film across language departments, rather than having to specialize in a particular language? The answer I received was an emphatic maybe, but that was enough for me to inquire further, once I was in graduate school, about teaching cinema globally.

BOTTOM 2
I taught Global Cinema again last fall. This time, it was entirely online, which allowed me to empower students to customize their learning experiences. So, for instance, in our unit on national cinemas, we began with a shared curriculum of films: Potemkin, Rashomon, Rules of the Game. Then students picked a national cinema they wanted to study in more depth and developed their own individual reading and screening schedules. This kind of flexibility would simply be impossible to facilitate in a more traditional, face-to-face learning environment.

TOP 3
In fifth grade, I got a board game called Statis-Pro Baseball. This game had cards for hundreds of different players, their statistics boiled down to usable sets of probabilities for pitching, hitting, fielding, running, and so on. As a kid, I loved playing this game but when I returned to it as a teenager, things got really interesting: several friends and I drafted players to play out abbreviated (60-game) seasons. We played every weekend. We kept statistics. We wrote news stories about our games. We were obsessed in the way kids can be before they start to discover dating and jobs and cars—the other parts of a balanced life.

BOTTOM 3
My wife of 13+ years and I have been married a little more than 14 years. Today, we began a shared curriculum of films: The Game of Life and the biodiversity of the American Midwest. Seasons are too often a perennial exercise in quiet desperation. So, we’ll do our best to nurture these seasons, and to help them last long enough to be meaningful, perhaps even to nurture. One simply does not successfully roll a random pack of wolves by the camp­ground to rip apart the newbies—who knew? As Dungeon Master, a firm hand—right down to the Dungeon Master analogy is even more apt: my Senior Seminar students’ 6000-word papers might be their longest quests to date, but they still need to be nurtured through the process. Teaching Seminar turns out to be an extended exercise in managing the anxiety of students: anxious about their research projects, anxious about graduating, anxious about their career trajectories after graduation. No more random rolls for wolves—the “real world” will throw those any number of challenges at my students. It already has! And yet here we all are—mark­ing our successes individually and collectively.

TOP 4
Trouble ensued when my teenage friends and I thought we’d “graduated” from mock baseball to, er, Dungeons & Dragons, the fantasy war board game. Sure, setting up all the game’s monsters in a big tournament akin to NCAA basketball’s March Madness was all well and good (gelatinous cube vs. wererebear—who do you root for?), but we knew we were “supposed” to go in Lord Of The Rings-type quests. Except we didn’t understand that, at first, those new characters need to be nurtured. One simply does not successfully roll a random pack of wolves by the camp­ground to rip apart the newbies—who knew? As Dungeon Master, a firm hand—a manager—is what’s needed.

BOTTOM 4
I’ve always thought teaching is like running a fantasy baseball league—we all load our scores onto Blackboard and follow the standings. Grades. Whatever. Or maybe the Dungeon Master analogy is even more apt: my Senior Seminar students’ 6000-word papers might be their longest quests to date, but they still need to be nurtured through the process. Teaching Seminar turns out to be an extended exercise in managing the anxiety of students: anxious about their research projects, anxious about graduating, anxious about their career trajectories after graduation. No more random rolls for wolves—the “real world” will throw those any number of challenges at my students. It already has! And yet here we all are—mark­ing our successes individually and collectively.

TOP 5
When I was a kid, cartoons were still a Saturday morning affair. I’m not sure how it started, but I got in the habit of rolling a die to choose which station to watch. It was easy enough to set it up: 1 = ABC, 2 = CBS, 3 = NBC. What drove me to this? Option paralysis? Didn’t I have eight-year-old self decide on his own whether to watch Electra Woman or Looney Tunes? Was I so enamored with board games that it didn’t seem like such a leap to go from spinning the wheel in The Game of Life to rolling a die to make important third-grader decisions? It’s like I was trying to turn my real life into one of those Choose Your Own Adventure books that became a mini-fad at the time. “If you choose to stay in the Boy Scouts, turn to page 84!”

BOTTOM 5
Gaming studies is an emerging sub-discipline within media studies. Indeed, the first Honors thesis I advised (the only Honors thesis I’ve advised) was on the emergence of the casual gaming industry, marked by mobile devices (Angry Birds, anyone), motion-sensor enabled consoles (e.g., the Nintendo Wii), and the like. My student, Zach, went so far as to loan me a Sony Connect console over winter break—for background research! And I tell you: the technology is dangerously fun. Left to my own devices, I might spend far too much time for my own good playing these videogames. I’ll just have to settle for a game of Tetris after I finish this sentence.

TOP 6
In terms of board games, I was a terrible loser. Awful. At holiday gatherings, one by one, my relatives vowed never to play with me again. I have a particularly shameful memory of a meltdown at a Door County, Wisconsin scout meeting, when I started whacking my paddle or otherwise acting up, that was it for the week. And he never, never let me win. He demanded to win (I realized that decades later), but first I wanted me to learn how to lose. I think I’m better now, but I still have to keep myself from going for the throat playing Yahtzee.

BOTTOM 6
We read The Hunger Games this fall in the Honors Book Club. The rules of the game within the novel are horrific: part military drill, part Shirley Jackson “Lottery”-esque ritual sacrifice, part reality TV send-up, 24 teens fight each other to the
There’s a play,” upon Avon says, “Where there’s a Will, as an old lapel button I acquired in Stratford—own self be true” and all that, then. Besides, internal judgment. “To thine about our growing up, though, is honing those concerns about external judgment. Part of the inevitable: neither is a mortal death for a post-apocalyptic nation’s viewing pleasure. You’d think the notion of being a good loser wouldn’t exactly weigh heavily on these characters’ minds—but in fact one of the philosophical questions the book asks us to ask ourselves is how to effectively retain our core humanity within such a horrific scenario. It’s easy to take the moral high ground in our minds... Just pay you’re never put to the test.

TOP 7
I hope this piece doesn’t come off as wide-eyed nostalgia for my pre-adolescent years. Maybe it’s inevitable. Cue “Sweet Caroline.”

BOTTOM 7
I hope this piece doesn’t come off as wide-eyed boosterism for the academic experience at Bridgewater State. Again, maybe it’s inevitable. My “out”: neither is a mortal sin, all told. I suppose we never fully forgive concerns about external judgment. Part of growing up, though, is honing those concerns about our internal judgment. “To thine own self be true” and all that, then. Besides, as an old lapel button I acquired in Stratford-upon-Avon says, “Where there’s a Will, there’s a play.”

TOP 8
Somewhere, in a storage box, there are audiotapes of me (fourth-grade me) doing play-by-play coverage of a board game Super Bowl. It was the culmination of a full-on, eight-game season, playing all teams solitaire-style, using See-Action Football, another one of my board-game obsessions. I kept and regularly updated standings—stats too. (What a wealth of these times we have when we’re young?) I don’t remember it ever being my dream to be an announcer; I just WAS an announcer in my head. On some level, I think all sports kids do this (complete with crowd noise). It came naturally—it was all part of our play.

BOTTOM 8
One of the great joys of being a professor is guiding students as they try to get where they want to be. Sometimes the means to that end is video production work. In Videography, it’s making short films (three days: YouTube). In Television Studio Production, it’s simulating news programs, talk shows, and such. You might be surprised just how many students want to be sportscasters, doing interviews or play-by-play, tied as they are to our vibrant Boston sports scene. The competition is intense: first for internships and later for paid positions. Finding that balance between encouraging those students to seek mentors to someone attempting to mentor (or at least not scar too terribly). These kinds of changes sneak up on all of us, right? John Lennon was right: “Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.” Of course, Kenny Rogers was also right: “You got to know where to hold ‘em, know where to fold ‘em.” That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it. If you know what I mean, and I think you do.

TOP 9
Post-tenure academic life is a funny thing. For instance, after years of portfolio creation and class visitation, I now find myself in the position of evaluating those portfolios and classes. Somewhere along the face, I’ve started to morph from someone seeking mentors to someone attempting to mentor (or at least not scar too terribly). “I’ve read Godley & Creme’s 1982 motion picture spectacle Koyaanisqatsi know well both its attitude toward human beings and its techniques for manipulating time. The film’s reputation consists of a mere few components: its title is a Hopi word that translates as “life out of balance”; it is a nonfiction, non-narrative feature that uses fast-motion and slow-motion cinematography to contemplate landscapes and cities in the United States; it has a minimalist musical score by Philip Glass that keeps pace with the rhythms of its frame rates and editing; and it protests the impact of human civilization on the natural world. Koyaanisqatsi became an unlikely object of fascination in the 1980s, meeting with surprising success at the box office and enjoying several afterlives: it has yielded two follow-up collaborations between Reggio and Glass called Powaqqatsi (1988) and Naqoyqatsi (2002), inspired countless imitations in television advertising and music videos, and appeared in introductory film textbooks, such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson’s Film Art (2004). Today, the film continues to find an audience: in December 2012, the Criterion Collection released a box set of the three “Qatsi” films on DVD and Blu-ray, and screenings of Koyaanisqatsi with live musical accompaniment have become part of the repertoire of the Philip Glass Ensemble. Familiar too are the major strains of criticism of the film. Reviews by Vincent Canby in The New York Times and by Harlan Jacobson in Film Comment read it as a simplifying construct that pits corrupt humanity against natural purity. Canby regarded it as a “fizzy” of a movie,” in part because its argument constitutes an “unequivocal indictment” of man’s violations of the natural world; Jacobson appraised Koyaanisqatsi more severely as a “banal” polemic. These and other assessments suggest that the film merely recapitulates a trite critique of the industrialized world. Engaging with Koyaanisqatsi’s inhuman temporality, however, means returning our attention to this “familiar” film to take seriously its aesthetic of de-familiarization, an