Values at Play:

Curriculum & Teaching Guide (4-week version)

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Summary

Project Overview

Values at Play (VAP) is a project that was originally funded by the National Science Foundation to explore issues related to values in digital games. The research designers were interested in how moral, social, and political content is conveyed through design features. Our multidisciplinary team of investigators includes game designers (both commercial and "activist"), artists, philosophers, educators, and social scientists. The team is pursuing several goals, including:

- Engaging game designers and design students in thinking about the role of values in game design.
- Providing resources and community for activist or values-conscious game designers.
- Developing a systematic methodology for considering moral, social, and political values in the design process.
- Developing and assessing curricular materials and instructional methods for engaging students in values conscious design.

If you'd like to learn more about the project, please read our *VAP FAQ* on visit the website www.valuesatplay.org.

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Values at Play: Integrating Human Values in Games

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National Science Foundation Grant CNS 0613893

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Curriculum Goals and Objectives

- Through the exercises in this unit, participants experiment with unconventional game themes and mechanics. We hope this experience will inspire them to consider a broader "vocabulary" of themes and mechanics in their design work.

- Participants will explore how to address social issues or consciously embody values in the games they create. More specifically, they should come to an understanding of how particular design features (e.g. mechanics, narrative themes) affect the values or issues content of their games. In other words, they will learn how values or issues are "translated" into specific game features through the design process.

- Participants will experience reflection and critique as an integral part of the design process. More specifically, participants will use reflection and critique to (a) discover the values that are relevant to their design projects, and (b) verify that those values have indeed been addressed in their finished work.

- Participants will learn to analyze existing games from a "values conscious" perspective. Pursuing this goal will give them a concrete experience of the idea that values are always "at play" in games whether designers intend them to be or not.

Scope of Values at Play

There are four sections in the Values at Play unit.

Section 1:

Review readings and introduction to core concepts; Grow-A-Game cards activity (described in the week 1 lesson plan).

Next steps: Video exercise, in which participants prepare a video clip of a game in which values are at play.

Section 2:

Review readings; participants share and discuss the video clips they've prepared for this week's exercise; participants use the Grow-A-Game cards to brainstorm game ideas.

Next Steps: Students write a detailed overview of the game ideas they've decided to flesh out for their final projects; students should begin paper prototyping their final projects.

Section 3:

Review readings; participants should seek feedback on their designs-in-progress.

Next Steps: Participants should continue to work on their designs; they should either be ready to play-test their games with classmates, or present a detailed set of paper prototypes.

Section 4:

Review readings; Participants should play-test and seek critique on their designs.

Unit overview

Section 1

Read and become familiar with the following articles.

Bogost, Ian. (2006). Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism, and Advocacy. *First Monday,* 11(9), Special Issue #7: CommandLines: The Emergence of Governance in Cyberspace.
http://firstmonday.org/issues/special11_9/bogost/index.html

Glover, Katherine. (2007). Why can't gay dwarves get married in Middle-earth? Salon.com.
http://www.salon.com/news/feature/2007/04/28/gay_dwarves/

McNeilly, Joe. (2007). Portal is the most subversive game ever. Gamesradar.com. http://www.gamesradar.com/f/portal-is-the-most-subversive-game-ever/a-20071207115329881080

VAP FAQ and Quick Reference (can be found in this packet or on the VAP website at http://valuesatplay.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/01/vapfaqquickref.pdf)

Main Ideas

Participants are introduced to the idea that values are "at play" in games. Certainly, most people would agree that values can be communicated through plot and characters. However, it can be argued that a game's rules or mechanics have an even more important role in shaping its values content. What are players allowed to do in the game? What activities are forbidden? Which in-game behaviors are rewarded, and which are punished?

Reflecting on these questions will give students a deeper understanding of the mechanisms through which values are conveyed in the games they play. We believe that being alert to these kinds of issues is an important first step towards becoming an effective values conscious designer.

Summary of Readings

The Bogost article should be an excellent starting point for discussion, as it describes specific processes through which games can be imbued with moral, social, and political meanings. In particular, there is one point that you may want to return to throughout the unit. In games, meaning is not only conveyed through conventional rhetoric (e.g. narrative and argument), but also through what Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric." This is his way of saying that games communicate through their rules, i.e. through what a player can and cannot do in a game, through how the scoring or reward system encourages or discourages particular behaviors, and through how specific mechanics shape interactions between players (or between players and AI-controlled characters). When your students create their game designs for this unit, they should always be considering their "procedural authorship." What meanings are communicated through the rules of their games? Do those meanings support or subvert the meanings that are communicated through more conventional rhetorical modes, such as story and character?
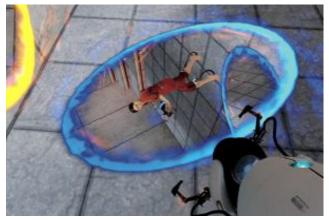
The Glover article provides a concrete example with which your students can approach these types of questions? It describes how the game development company Turbine dealt with the issue of whether to enable same-sex marriage in their game *Lord of the Rings Online*.

The McNeilly article is a favorite of the VAP team; it provides another example of how the design features of a mainstream game can be interpreted from a values perspective. McNeilly argues that *Portal* is loaded

with subversive social and political meanings. Do your students agree that *Portal* is a feminist masterpiece? Are feminist values "built into" the game on a structural level, or are the allegedly feminist aspects of *Portal* purely a product of the author's imagination?

The VAP FAQ has been designed to respond to some specific concerns that students have had with our curriculum in the past. For example, it addresses the questions of if values conscious games can actually be fun or engaging, and if values conscious design has anything to do with the so-called "family values" movement. It also provides a concise general introduction to the VAP project.

Activity

Use the Grow-A-Game cards.

1. Form discussion group(s).

2. Each group should draw 1 blue (values) card.

3. Within a groups, participants should collaboratively produce examples of existing games that embody the value indicated on the card they've drawn. The games can embody the value in a positive or negative way. For example, if a group draws the "trust" card, they can think of games in which the value of trust is either affirmed or violated.

4. At the end of the exercise, groups should select their best ideas and present them for discussion to the instructor and class.

Example

Near the beginning of the VAP project, our group decided to brainstorm several examples of existing, well-known games that embodied particular values. We hoped these examples would illustrate one of the central points of our project, that values are always "at play" in games, and that this true not just of "activist" or "socially conscious" games, but also of mainstream games. Using the values cards, one of the project's graduate assistants wrote this analysis of how the value of "empathy" is embodied in Sony Computer Entertainment's ICO.

In ICO, one of the most critically acclaimed games of the last console generation, the PC is a boy who must escort the Princess Yorda safely out of a castle, protecting her from shadowy monsters and helping her navigate the castle's environmental hazards. Many players describe their experiences with the game as deeply affecting, primarily because, unlike other games in the save-the-princess genre, ICO elicits real empathy towards the princess. One of the reasons ICO does this so well is that empathy is built into the game's mechanics, and not just its narrative. Yorda who looks very frail, is not nearly as mobile as the PC. In order to escape with her he must create safe paths through dangerous environments, for example, by lowering platforms for her to hop onto, and creating bridges for her to cross. When Yorda has to jump a wide gap, the PC must wait for her on the other side with an arm outstretched to help her across. If she can't quite reach the other side, a beautifully rendered animation shows the PC catching her hand and gently lifting her to safety. Other animations further develop the tender relationship between the PC and Yorda. For example, when they reach a save point (depicted as a couch), they sit and fall asleep hand-in-hand leaning against each other. In this way,

the game mechanics and the representational aspects work together to make the player feel protective of, and empathetic towards Yorda.

In other save-the-princess games, the princess herself is hardly more than an afterthought, and these games almost exclusively focus on a male PC's (often violent) exploits, whether it's jumping on anthropomorphic mushrooms and defeating Bowser (as in Mario), or recapturing pieces of the Triforce from fearsome monsters (as in Zelda). The designers of ICO challenge this paradigm, shifting the focus from violent rescue to caring and protective in-game behaviors. (Belman, 2007)

We don't necessarily expect your students' analyses to be as detailed as the one we've provided here. In this case, the author reflected on his example for several days before writing. Still, we hope that it gives you a clear picture of the type of thinking this exercise can elicit.

Readings

1. Frasca, Gonzalo. (2004) Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues. In: Harrigan, Pat & Wardrip-Fruin, Noah (Eds.) First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. Cambridge, The MIT Press. http://www.electronicbookreview.com/thread/firstperson/Boalian

2. Flanagan, M. & Nissenbaum, H. (2007). A game design methodology to incorporate social activist themes. *Proceedings of CHI 2007.* New York: ACM Press, 181–190. http://www.tiltfactor.org/wp-content/uploads2/Digra2011-GrowAGameTool-BelmanNissenbaumFlanaganDiamond.pdf

3. Winner, L. (1988). Do artifacts have politics? In L. Winner, *The whale and the reactor: A search for limits in an age of high technology.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. pp. 19 http://zaphod.mindlab.umd.edu/docSeminar/pdfs/Winner.pdf

Preparing for Next Section

Ask each student to create a short video clip that illustrates how one particular value is at play in a mainstream commercial game. If students have video cameras, they can tape themselves playing and perhaps narrate over the clip. Alternatively, they can comment on a video they've found online. Look here for an example of one student's video assignment from last year - http://www.youtube.com/v/hRq81IZzp14.

Clips should be uploaded to your class's page on the Values on Play website. If you don't find a link to your class's page here -

http://valuesatplay.org/?page_id=10 - please contact us for assistance

Week 2

Section 2 Overview

Participants should take a few minutes to evaluate how values are "at play" in the game they've chosen. Is there understanding on which games express which values through which design features? Or is there a considerable amount of abstraction? In some cases, this exercise tends to elicit some significant differences of opinion. This highlights the point that people's interpretations of values in media can be very complex, and strongly anchored in their own predispositions and experiences.

Summary of Readings

The Winner article is one of several readings in the curriculum drawn from interdisciplinary studies on values in technology, and it provides a broader view of the issues your students will grapple with in this class. Do technological artifacts in and of themselves have values, or does moral significance only emerge in the ways that people use these artifacts? Winner addresses this question with reference to the work of Robert Moses, an influential urban planner who shaped much of New York City's physical infrastructure in the mid-20th century. Moses masterminded the construction of bridges over many New York parkways. As you can tell from the

accompanying image, the bridges are built far too low for buses to pass underneath. Since some of New York's beaches could only be reached via those parkways, people who depended on public buses for transportation were effectively denied access. By blocking bus traffic, the bridges reserved these beaches for people wealthy enough to drive cars. Winner's point is that, without any further human intervention, the bridges facilitated classist outcomes by keeping poor people off of the beaches. In this way, classist values were built into their physical structure. If this is how values are built into physical artifacts, then how might one build them into games? Is there some analogy to be made between the way that values are embodied in physical artifacts and the ways in which they are "at play" in games?

The Flanagan and Nissenbaum article was deeply inspired by Winner's piece, but specifically deals with issues related to values in game design. It provides a detailed description of how values are "at play" in every aspect of the design process, and it should be helpful to your students as they begin designing their own values conscious games.

Finally, in the Frasca article, there are some strikingly original ideas regarding how to incorporate moral, social, and political considerations into the design process. In our experience, this article is very inspiring to students using the VAP curriculum, and its ideas are often a source of inspiration to students working on their design projects. In particular, students seem excited by Frasca's example of modding the *Sims* to create a game that deals with alcoholism.

It's worth noting that one passage in Frasca's article is strongly at odds with VAP's philosophical orientation. While Frasca argues that games can deal political and social issues, he also thinks they are an inappropriate medium for conveying values. In the VAP project, our position is that values are always conveyed in games, through their conventional rhetorical features

(e.g. story), and through their mechanics and rules. Juxtaposing Frasca's view with VAP's could be an interesting spur for class discussion. The quote from Frasca is reproduced below:

> Our religious and moral values have been historically shaped in this way through different sacred books (*Bible*, *Koran*, *Popol Vuh*). Although the interpretation of sacred texts has always been open, the written words and the stories themselves have mainly remained fixed. On the other hand, simulation is dynamic and its essence is change: it produces different outcomes. This makes simulations not such a good choice for sacred moral codes since you may not want to have your holy scripts alternately read, "Thou shall not kill," and "Thou shall kill." This also explains why videogames are not a good realm for historic events or characters or for making moral statements. A videogame about Anne Frank would be perceived as immoral, since the fact that she could survive or die depending on the player's performance would trivialize the value of human life. We all know that Anne Frank died and the reasons for her death; her story serves to convey a particular set of values.

> The potential of simulation is not as a conveyor of values, but as a way to explore the mechanics of dynamic systems. (Frasca, 2004)

Activity

This activity uses the Grow-A-Game cards. One deck will be needed for each group of students.

1. Develop design groups.

2. Each group will draw 1 blue (values) card, one yellow (social issues) card, and 1 green (game mechanics) card.

3. Each group should generate and flesh out a game idea using the constraints that are indicated by the card they've drawn.

4. At the end of the exercise, groups should present their game ideas for critique by the instructor and the class.

Example

When we ran a Grow-A-Game workshop at Carnegie Mellon's 2008 Future of Interactive Technology for Peace conference, one group of aspiring game designers generated a particularly compelling game idea. They drew the cards depicted in the accompanying image, so their task was to brainstorm a game addressing issues related to colonialism, embodying the value of community, and in which the primary mechanic is protecting.

The game idea they presented cleverly reworked the conventions of turn-based strategy games to fit the constraints of the exercise. In their game, the player controls a community that is being colonized by a much stronger military force. The community cannot defeat or drive out the colonizers. Rather, the player's goal is to protect the community's cultural traditions until the colonizers leave. So, while the colonizers try to apprehend the community's spiritual and cultural leaders, the player must protect them through misdirection and subterfuge. Furthermore, the leaders must be kept in frequent contact with their community, so that cultural traditions can be practiced and passed on to the next generation. The frequent practice of cultural traditions bolsters community morale, which prevents community members from betraying their leaders to the colonizers. The player's challenge is to maintain the leaders' active roles in the

community, while at the same time helping the leaders to evade the colonizers.

Readings

Note: Some of the "readings" for next section are actually games that are freely available online. As participants begin working on their final projects, we hope these games provide some inspiration.

Zimmerman, E. (2003). Play as research: The iterative design process. http://www.ericzimmerman.com/texts/Iterative_Design.htm

Latour, B. (1994). Where are the missing masses? Sociology of a door. In Wiebe Bijker and John Law (Eds.) Shaping technology/Building society: Studies in sociotechnical change. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 225–259. http://www.brunolatour.fr/articles/article/050.html

Hush (Game). Johnson, D., Antonisse, J., Pirello, B., & Orton, J. http://interactive.usc.edu/members/jantonisse/2008/01/hush.html

September 12th (Game). Newsgaming.com. http://www.newsgaming.com/newsgames.htm

Next Steps

On the class website, students should post a detailed overview of the game ideas they've decided to flesh out for their final projects. These game ideas can be the ones they produced during this week's class activity, or entirely new. However, students must be able to make a plausible argument that at least one value from the Grow-A-Game cards deck is at play in the game. Their overview should describe:

1. The values that are at play in their game.

2. The game's "core mechanics" and how those mechanics relate to the values they've chosen.

3. The overall context in which the core mechanics are situated, e.g. they should have at least a rough idea of the game's narrative aspects, what the player experience will be like, etc.

Also, students should begin to paper prototype their game ideas. Paper prototyping is a process of creating rough designs of an interface to use as models. Many students use Photoshop to create paper prototypes, though they can also be hand drawn. We've included an example from a previous class here. This paper prototype illustrates a "boss fight" in Nicholas Pappas's design document for *One Nation Under Smog*.

An Important Note on this Section and Exercise

Values conscious design is not necessarily about creating activist games. We believe that, as a methodology, it is equally applicable to mainstream game design. You may want to stress to your students that they do not have to create an "activist" or "social issues" game for the final project. *ICO*, described earlier in this packet, is an excellent example of a game that effectively conveys values but doesn't have an activist or social issues agenda.

While games for this unit do not have to be activist, games can embody values in innovative ways. While a 2-player first-person shooter does technically embody the value of cooperation, it is also a kind of game that has been made dozens of times before by designers who weren't considering values at all in their design processes. Designers who are considering values can expand boundaries of game design like to see what your students can do with the unconventional mechanics represented in the cards, such as voting, nurturing, and sharing. Using those mechanics, we expect they'll be able to create games in which values are at play in ways that haven't yet been explored in mainstream games.

A Second Note

Students will have very different experiences depending on the type of game they decide to work on for their final project. For example, a student working on a relatively simple "casual" game may be able to build a functioning digital version that their classmates can play and critique. Alternatively, many casual games can be play-tested even before a digital version is built. See Eric Zimmerman's discussion of play-testing SiSSYFIGHT (in his article assigned for next class) for an example of how a game can be play-tested using post-it notes.

On the other hand, students who decide to work on a more complex game, such as a Final Fantasy-style RPG, may find it difficult to play-test their work. Of course, play-testing these types of games is not impossible. We have seen some student's play-test role playing games by engaging their classmates in a classic pen-and-paper Dungeons and Dragons type of experience. Certainly, there are many other ways to play-test complex games without actually building a digital version. Still, in our experience, this process is significantly more labor intensive for complex games than it is for simple games.

Depending on the goals of your course, you may or may not require your students to play-test functioning (digital or non-digital) versions of their games. If you do not require this, students in your class may focus more on providing detailed paper prototypes of their proposed games. This often works well, and we have seen students produce many intriguing paper prototypes. However, for students working in this way, it is important that they clearly articulate the rules that would structure their game were it to actually be built. This is especially important in values conscious design, as rules play a central part in shaping a game's values content.

Week 3

Section 3 Overview

   In this class, students will begin to critique each other's work. The Zimmerman article describes a type of critique that is particularly valuable to game designers – play-testing. Although students are probably not ready to have their games play-tested by this class, they should start to think about how they can prepare a digital or non-digital version for next week's class and beyond. More broadly, students should be thinking about how values conscious design can be integrated into more traditional design methodologies, such as the iterative design framework described by Zimmerman.

   Also, for this week students will have played some games that convey values in interesting and effective ways. They should notice that these games accomplish this through innovative reconceptualizations of traditional game mechanics. We hope these games inspire your students to do similarly innovative work.

Summary of Readings

   The Latour article is a classic of sociology of technology, in which he describes how moral values can be built into something as simple as a door. He argues that in order to understand the moral fabric of a society, one has to understand the contribution made by objects as well as that made by people. Like the Winner article, this piece has strongly influenced the VAP

project, and should help your students to think more generally about the relevance of values to designed artifacts like games.

The Zimmerman article describes game design as "a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining a work in progress." Certainly, this "iterative" approach helps designers to balance the difficulty of their games, iron out user interface issues, and so forth. How might it be applied to values conscious design? Perhaps there is some process by which users can test whether their game is conveying values as intended, and then use that feedback to refine their game's values content?

The two games we've assigned are both quite innovative from a values conscious design perspective. Hush uses a singing mechanic to immerse the player in the role of a Rwandan Tutsi mother hiding with her baby in a shack during the country's 1994 genocide. The mother

sings a lullaby to pacify the baby as soldiers pass by outside their window. If the lullaby falters, then the baby begins to cry more loudly, and the soldiers may discover them in the shack. The player "sings" the lullaby by typing it at the precise rhythm indicated by on-screen prompts. This game was actually created by graduate design students in a class using the VAP curriculum. Their goal was to create a game in which the value of empathy is at play. Do you think they were successful?

In *September 12th*, the player begins the game looking at a busy dessert marketplace filled with people who are wearing what looks like traditional Muslim or African clothing. Here and there in the

crowd there are figures wearing *kafiyeh* and carrying guns – presumably, these are intended to represent terrorists. The player controls a targeting reticule that can be positioned anywhere in the market, and left-clicking fires a missile at the reticule's location. However, if the player tries to fire on the terrorists, the explosion is so large and the crowd so thick that regular civilians are inevitably killed in the attack. When this happens, people around the explosion begin mourning, and some of them become terrorists themselves. In this way, firing a missile will always create more terrorists than it kills. One of the remarkable things about this game is how seamlessly political content is built into its mechanics. The designers' commentary on post-9/11 American foreign policy is conveyed not through story or argument, but through the rules of a game.

Activity

Students should return to the design groups they formed in last week's class, and solicit general feedback on their designs-in-progress from members of their groups. Their games should be based, at least in part, on what of the values represented in the Grow-A-Game cards. Is it clear to their group members which values are meant to be "at play" in their games? Or is the values content of their games being interpreted differently than expected?

Readings

1. Friedman, B. & Nissenbaum, H. (1996). Bias in computer systems. *ACM Transactions on Information Systems, 14*(3), 330–347. http://vsdesign.org/publications/pdf/64_friedman.pdf

2. Desurvire, H., Caplan, M., & Toth, J. A. (2004). Using heuristics to improve the playability of games. CHI 2004, Vienna, Austria: http://userbehavioristics.com/downloads/usingheuristics.pdf

3. Sweester, P. & Wyeth, P. (2005) GameFlow: a model for evaluating player enjoyment in games. *ACM Computers in entertainment, 3*(3), 1–24.
http://coursesite.uhcl.edu/hsh/PeresSc/Classes/PSYC6419seminar/Wyeth-games.pdf

Assignment for Next Section

Students should continue to flesh out and paper prototype their designs, building on the feedback of their classmates, and focusing on how particular game features relate to the values they've chosen to guide their design process. For next week, they should be prepared to either have a functioning (digital or non-digital) version of their game to be play-tested by classmates, or a detailed set of paper prototypes to be critiqued.

Week 4

Section 4 Overview

In this class, students will receive feedback from their classmates on their designs-in-process. Students may have their classmates play-test an early build or a non-digital version of their game. Or, if building a functioning game isn't required for your class, they may present a detailed set of paper prototypes for their classmates to critique. In either case, it's important that feedback is focused on values content as well as more traditional criteria, such as playability and narrative cohesion.

Summary of Readings

Like the Winner and Latour article, the Friedman and Nissenbaum piece gives your students a glimpse of the broader discussion about values in technology that is occurring in a variety of fields. It describes how some airline reservations systems are biased in the sense that they produce search results that systematically favor some airlines over others. This means that they shape consumer behavior (as consumers are far more likely to buy tickets for flights that appear at the top of search results) in a way that disadvantages the airlines these systems are biased against. How might bias appear in video games? If I make an RPG in which it is easier to solve problems through combat than through discussion and diplomacy, is it fair to say that this game is biased towards combat and against non-violent problem solving? If so, is this bias in any way comparable to the biases that Friedman and Nissenbaum identified in airline reservation systems?

Both of the other articles assigned for this week outline sets of criteria for evaluating games. The criteria proposed are those we generally associate with video games, such as immersion, challenge, game play, and game story. How might values-oriented criteria be integrated into the frameworks proposed by these two articles? This is a question your students will be grappling with this class as they critique their classmates games from a values-conscious perspective.

Background to the curriculum

What is VAP?

Values at Play (VAP) was a project originally funded by the National Science Foundation to explore issues related to values designed into in digital games. Our multidisciplinary team of investigators includes game designers (both commercial and "activist"), artists, philosophers, educators, and social scientists. The team is pursuing several goals, including:

- Engaging game designers and design students in thinking about the role of values in game design.

- Providing resources and community for activist or values-conscious game designers.

- Developing a systematic methodology for integrating values in the design process.

- Developing and assessing curricular materials and instructional methods for engaging design students in issues related to values in game design.

What are the Goals of the VAP Curriculum?

In brief, we'd like to help students and faculty begin the discussion on values in games. Although the particulars of values are unfamiliar terrain for many designers, this is a topic that seems to have broad appeal in the games world. In classes where we have already implemented the VAP curriculum, students have been overwhelmingly enthusiastic about expressing values like environmentalism, justice, and privacy in their games. When we have presented our work at conferences, industry events, or hosted our own

events, game designers, scholars, and educators have been eager to further explore these issues as they relate to their own work. We think that a greater understanding of values in game design will inspire games that are deeper, more sophisticated, and better at tackling a broad array of topics and themes. The curriculum is our attempt to kindle the discussion on values in games amongst students, knowing that the work they do will shape the future of our medium.

Another goal of the curriculum is to introduce students to VAP's systematic methodology for integrating values into the design process. Just as there are methodologies for considering usability, safety, and reliability in the design of systems, we believe there is much to be gained by taking a similar approach with values. For an overview of the methodology, please see our Quick Reference Guide, which is enclosed in this packet.

Do the VAP Curriculum & Methodology Promote Particular Values, such as "Family Values"?

We should note here that many of the people who work with VAP have done strongly values-oriented work in the past. In prior work, members of our team have focused on issues of gender equity, social justice, privacy, and universal access to education—values found in constitutions, bills of rights, and charters across the world. Certainly, these values continue to be important to us, and our work with VAP is exciting partly because it gives us the opportunity to consider how they might be expressed through games.

However, the VAP design methodology is not built to accommodate only those "good" values. For example, it might be as useful to designers making a game expressing negative values as it would for designers of games that affirm equity, diversity and tolerance. However, we'd like to note that the students we've worked with have expressed enthusiasm for creating games about values like environmentalism, sustainability, justice, and

freedom of expression. We think their work is groundbreaking and important, and were thrilled to be able to assist them through VAP.

Another point we'd like to raise relates to our use if the word "values" in the name of our project and in its literature. We are aware that the word has acquired a particular connotation through association with conservative political advocacy groups. Many people hear values discussed primarily in the context of social issues like women's reproductive rights, and gay rights. Groups who take a conservative position on these issues often champion themselves as defenders of "family values". To further complicate matters, many politically-motivated and spurious attacks on the video games industry have been made under the mantle of family values. So, it's unsurprising that values may be an unpopular word amongst aspiring game designers.

We state strongly that our project is not an endorsement of conservative "family values", and in no way is it a vehicle to bring those values into the game design process or community. Rather, when we use the word values we borrow the term from philosophical discourse to refer to the moral, political and social dimensions of games. Our position is that designers who master these dimensions will be able to express themselves and their ideas through games in a way that others cannot.

Is the VAP Curriculum Really About Making Boring, Preachy Games that Nobody Would Ever Play for Fun?

There is a perception that "values games" are preachy, ineffective, and, worst of all, boring. We strongly reject this idea. In fact, we think that values conscious games tend to be fresher and less clichéd than typical commercial games. Under the pressures of industry, deadlines, or financial constraints, game designers, just like creative workers in other media, are often forced to fall back on standard clichés. So, time and again, we get the damsel in distress, the light-skinned hero vs. dark villain, problem solving

through violence, as well as other clichés that are more subtly value laden. When designers have the opportunity and the tools for values conscious design, these clichés can be deconstructed, and every aspect of how they function and what they "mean" in a game can be systematically considered. This puts designers in a better position to consider radical design alternatives, and to do work that reflects their own creative vision.

The benefits of radically departing from cliché are evident in some of the most innovative games in recent memory, like Valve's brilliant *Portal* which reimagines the first person shooter as a largely non-violent puzzle game, or Ubisoft's *Beyond Good & Evil*, which gives us the female action hero as a maternal truth-seeker (as opposed to the Lara Croft cliché of female action hero as hyper-sexualized warrior).

VAP Quick Reference

Integrating Values into Design: A Quick Guide to the VAP Methodology

The VAP methodology presents designers with a systematic process for considering values in game design. Just as there are established methodologies for considering usability and (in the case of online games) security in the design process, we feel there is much to be gained by similarly addressing issues relating to values. The three steps of the VAP methodology, discovery, translation, and verification, will be discussed in the following sections.

However, we should note here that the steps are not meant to be followed in strict sequence. For example, a designer may *discover* that certain values are relevant to his or her game (step 1), then s/he may *translate* those values into design features (step 2), and in the process of translation s/he may discover new values relevant to the game (step 1 again). After designing these new values into the game (step 2 again), the methodology would recommend that s/he systematically *verify* whether the values content of the game is as intended (step 3). In short, the methodology describes a looping iterative process in which designers may return to previous steps, skip ahead, or repeat steps as needed.

Discovery

How can designers discover what values are relevant to their projects? The VAP methodology recommends that they look to several sources of values, including:

Values determined by the nature or purpose of a game

If you're designing "an educational game that can be played by kids, no matter what their level of reading ability," then the value of "access to education" or "access to basic services" is implicated in the design by the nature and purpose of the game. Likewise, if you're building "an adventure game that upends sexist stereotypes," then the value of "gender equity" is relevant by virtue of how you've conceived of the game. This is the most obvious source of values, in that they are determined by the most basic part of the design process, i.e. the definition of your project.

Values that emerge through the specification of design features

Even when values are not determined by the nature or purpose of a game, they tend to emerge out of the design process as the decisions are made regarding the game's mechanics and narrative aspects. For example, in building the reward or scoring system for a game, a designer might find that one approach encourages cooperative behavior, and another promotes independent problem solving. The decision regarding which scoring system to use might be influenced by what values the designer wants to embed in his or her game.

Stakeholders' Values

Sometimes particular people or groups may have a stake in a projects' outcome. The VAP methodology recommends considering their goals, priorities, preferences and expectations as a potential source of values. Typically, the list of stakeholders includes the designers, users or consumers, and affiliated enterprises. Designers may let their own values inform the

design process. They can also assume or research the values of whoever will play or purchase the game. Finally, they can consider the values of enterprises – institutions, companies, and government agencies, for example – who are involved in the sponsorship, distribution, implementation, or use of their games.

Translation

In the translation stage, designers take values discovered in the previous stage and translate them into design features. In the VAP methodology, there are three activities associated with translation. These are operationalization, implementation, and resolution of conflict.

Operationalization involves rendering values concretely in the context of a design project. For example, I may decide that the value of privacy is important to the design of a MMORPG that I am creating. Does that mean that the game will allow players to converse privately with each other, or that a log of players' activities in the game will not be readily available to other players, or that players' real world identities will be hidden from each other, or that the narrative will deal with themes related to privacy? Does it mean all or some or none of the above? In this stage, designers decide how relevant values will be expressed in the game world.

Implementation refers to designing features in a game that embody the operational definitions of relevant values. For example, how exactly do I design my MMORPG conversation system to best embody the value of privacy (without sacrificing other important considerations, like ease-of-use)? Do I design a system in which only people directly involved in a conversation can "hear" what is being said? If so, who decides whether a person is allowed to become directly involved in a conversation? Does it take a consensus of all participants in the conversation to include a new player? Or perhaps just a majority of the participants will suffice? Should moderators or

administrators be able to find out what is said in private conversations? Designers often find that the greatest challenges are here, in the gritty details of implementation.

Resolution of Conflict becomes a factor when designers commit to certain values in the discovery process, but find they are unable to embody all of them in their game. Consider our example of an MMORPG conversation system that embodies the value of privacy. What if we decide that the value of "freedom from harm" is also important to our design, and we consider hate speech to be a source of harm? Potentially, the values of privacy and freedom from harm, as operationalized in our design, could come into conflict with each other. For example, if hate speech occurs within a guild, some members might feel victimized, but they might also feel uncomfortable approaching an administrator for fear of losing status amongst their peers. If the conversation system allows players to keep what is said private from administrators, it could be difficult to eliminate hate speech in the game. The VAP methodology proposes three strategies for dealing with these types of conflicts, which are described here:

Resolving conflict through trade-offs: We may resolve a conflict of values in design by prioritizing one value over the other(s). For example, we may decide that protecting the privacy of players' conversations is more important than freedom from harm. Using this strategy, we would sacrifice the value of freedom from harm so that the value of privacy can be fully realized in our design.

Resolving conflict through compromise: In this strategy, we would retain both privacy and freedom from harm in the design, but one or both of those values would have to be embedded in a weaker or "compromised" form to assuage the conflict. For example, imagine that our MMORPG conversation system was designed to flag conversations in which people were using words typically associated with hate speech, such as racial slurs. Moderators might

only be allowed to read flagged conversations, and, if they found hate speech, they would be authorized to take action against the perpetrators. In this system, the value of privacy is embedded in a less than absolute form, as moderators can sometimes read conversations that participants have marked as private. However, if we decide that freedom from harm is important to our design, this approach might represent a reasonable compromise.

Dissolving conflict through redesign: In some cases, it may be that a values conflict does not arise because the relevant values are fundamentally incompatible. Rather, certain elements of the design are bringing those values into conflict with each other. If those elements are malleable, then the conflict may be resolved without sacrificing or compromising any of the relevant values. Can you think of a redesign that might allow us to retain privacy and freedom from harm, both fully realized, in our MMORPG conversation system?

Verification

In this stage, designers verify that they have successfully implemented relevant values as intended. Significant questions in this stage might include: Do game mechanics support activities that affirm relevant values as appropriate? Does the overall game design represent the values in question?

Designers may draw from a many empirical and non-empirical assessment and evaluation techniques to support verification, e.g. internal play-testing amongst the design team, structured and unstructured interviews, surveys, field observations, case studies, and many more. The VAP approach encourages that designers use verification techniques throughout the design process, so that they can provide guidance at every stage.

Further Reading

This document only provides a quick overview of the VAP methodology. For interested
readers, we recommend the book *Values at Play in Digital Games.* (2014) and the
following articles, available at www.valuesatplay.org:

Belman, Jonathan, Flanagan, Mary, Nissenbaum, Helen, & Diamond, James. "Grow-A-
Game: A Tool for Values Conscious Design & Analysis of Digital Games." *Ethics in
Computer Games & Cinema*, ed. Jose Zagal. San Diego: Cognella

Belman, J., Flanagan, M., and Nissenbaum, H. "Exploring the Creative Potential of
Values Conscious Design: Students' Experiences with the VAP Curriculum."
Eludamos: The Journal for Computer Game Culture 4(1) 2010.

Belman, J. & Flanagan, M. "Designing Games to Foster Empathy." *Cognitive
Technology Journal* 14(2) 2010, 5-15.

Belman, Jonathan, Flanagan, Mary, and Nissenbaum, Helen. "Instructional Methods
and Curricula for "'Values Conscious Design.'" *Loading… The Canadian Journal
of Game Studies*, 3: 4, 2009.

Flanagan +Nissenbaum, H. "Design Heuristics for Activist Games." *Beyond Barbie to
Mortal Kombat.* C. Heeter and Y. Kafai (eds). Cambridge: MIT Press 2008.

Flanagan, M., Howe, D., + Nissenbaum, H. "Embodying Values in Technology: Theory
and Practice" In *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*. Jeroen van den
Hoven + John Weckert (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008,
322-353.

Flanagan + Nissenbaum. "A Game Design Methodology to Incorporate Social Activist
Themes." *Proceedings of CHI 2007*. New York, NY: ACM Press, 181 - 190.

Flanagan, Howe + Nissenbaum. "Design Method Outline for Activist Gaming." *Worlds
In Play: International Perspectives on Digital Games Research* (New Literacies
+ Digital Epistemologies). ed. Suzanne de Castell + Jennifer Jensen. NY: Peter
Lang, 2007.

Flanagan, Nissenbaum, Belman, + Diamond. "A Method For Discovering Values in
Digital Games." *Proceedings of the Digital Games Research Association
(DIGRA)*, Sept 24-28 Tokyo, 2007.

Flanagan. "Making Games for Social Change." *AI & Society: The Journal of Human-
Centered Systems.* Springer London: Springer, 20(4), January 2006, 493 -
505.

Flanagan, "My Profile, Myself in Playculture." *Exploring Digital Artefacts*. Johan
Bornebusch + Patrik Hernwall, Editors. M3 Publication, 2006, 20-29.

Flanagan, "Politicising Playculture." *GAME/PLAY Exhibition Catalog*. HTTP Gallery,
     London 2006.

Flanagan, Mary, Howe, D. C., and Nissenbaum, Helen. "Values at Play: Design
     Tradeoffs in Socially-Oriented Game Design." *Proceedings of CHI 2005.* New
     York, NY: ACM Press, 751-760.

Reading & Activities Checklist

Section 1

Readings

- ↓ Bogost, Ian. (2006). Playing Politics: Videogames for Politics, Activism, and Advocacy. *First Monday,* 11(9), Special Issue #7: CommandLines: The Emergence of Governance in Cyberspace.

- ↓ Glover, Katherine. (2007). Why can't gay dwarves get married in Middle-earth? Salon.com.

- ↓ McNeilly, Joe. (2007). Portal is the most subversive game ever. Gamesradar.com.

- ↓ VAP FAQ & Quick Reference

Activities

- ↓ Using the Grow-A-Game cards in class to identify values in existing games.
- ↓ Students create a short video clip that illustrates how values are at play in an existing game.

Section 2

Readings

- ↓ Frasca, Gonzalo. (2004) Videogames of the Oppressed: Critical Thinking, Education, Tolerance, and Other Trivial Issues. In: Harrigan, Pat & Wardrip-Fruin, Noah (Eds.) First Person: New Media as Story, Performance, and Game. Cambridge, The MIT Press.
- ↓ Flanagan, M. & Nissenbaum, H. (2007). A game design methodology to incorporate social activist themes. *Proceedings of CHI 2007.* New York: ACM Press, 181–190.
- ↓ Winner, L. (1988). Do artifacts have politics? In L. Winner, *The whale and the reactor: A search for limits in an age of high technology.* Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. pp. 19

Activities

- ↓ Using the Grow-A-Game cards to brainstorm game ideas.

- Preparing an overview of the game ideas they will flesh out for their final projects, and posting it to the class wiki.

- Paper prototyping their game ideas.

Section 3

Readings

- Zimmerman, E. (2003). Play as research: The iterative design process.

- Latour, B. (1994). Where are the missing masses? Sociology of a door. In Wiebe Bijker and John Law (Eds.) Shaping technology/Building society: Studies in sociotechnical change. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 225–259.

- *Hush* (Game). Johnson, D., Antonisse, J., Pirello, B., & Orton, J.

- *September* 12th (Game). Newsgaming.com.

Activities

- Students receive feedback from classmates on their designs-in-progress.

Section 4

Readings

- Friedman, B. & Nissenbaum, H. (1996). Bias in computer systems. *ACM Transactions on Information Systems, 14*(3), 330–347.

- Desurvire, H., Caplan, M., & Toth, J. A. (2004). Using heuristics to improve the playability of games. CHI 2004, Vienna, Austria:

- Sweester, P. & Wyeth, P. (2005) GameFlow: a model for evaluating player enjoyment in games. *ACM Computers in entertainment, 3*(3), 1–24.