



Learning Deliberately: Walden, a Game-Based Curriculum

Matthew Farber¹ and Tracy Fullerton²

¹ University of Northern Colorado, Greeley, USA

² University of Southern California, Los Angeles, USA

Matthew.Farber@unco.edu

tfullerton@cinema.usc.edu

Abstract. This hands-on workshop will present strategies and examples of how to design game-based learning that treats games as multi-modal texts in a broader ecology of learning. As part of the Walden, a game EDU project, an interdisciplinary team of educators, researchers, curriculum designers, evaluators outreach experts, and game designers have re-designed the core experience of the award-winning independent game, Walden, a game (<https://www.waldengame.com/educators>), to develop inclusive, classroom-friendly, and standards-aligned games-based learning modules. This workshop includes a hands-on demonstration of these new educational game modules and integrated curriculum. These lessons use the game as a text to prompt critical discussion and learning. The session reflects on what we learned when we applied a playcentric design method to the challenges of teaching during COVID-19 and beyond. Participants will engage collaboratively with the lessons and will take away best practices in the use and design of multimodal learning games.

Keywords: Game-Based Learning, Video Games, Multimodal Learning, Curriculum.

1 Introduction

When integrated into learning environments, video games can create rich opportunities for learning. Similar to books, movies, and other multimodal forms of media, video games can be used as a means to teach curriculum interactively. However, video games by themselves should not be solely responsible for children's learning. Gee observed how video game players learn and master semiotics, by assimilating knowledge through play [1]. Semiotics connect to notions around multimodal learning, where meaning is transmitted and understood with written text and spoken words, but also with "visual, audio, gestural, tactile, and spatial patterns of meaning" (p3) [2]. Gee [1] wrote, "Meaning and knowledge are built up through various modalities (images, texts, symbols, interactions, abstract design, sound, etc.), not just words" (p. 224).

Walden, a game is a first-person exploration game about the life of American philosopher Henry David Thoreau during his experiment in self-reliant living at Walden Pond. Told through multimodal semiotics, along with written and spoken text and character embodiment, the game begins in the summer of 1845 when Thoreau moved to the Pond and built his cabin there. Players follow in Thoreau's footsteps, surviving in the woods by finding food and fuel and maintaining their shelter and clothing. At the same time, players are surrounded by the beauty of the woods and the Pond, which hold a promise of a sublime life beyond these basic needs. The commercial game serves as the creative source for the new games-based learning modules, which provide new content aligned with standards-based lessons.



Fig. 1. Screenshots from Walden, a game EDU Self-Reliance module.

1.1 Developing a Modular Game-Based Curriculum

Starting in 2020, the Walden team, funded by a new grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), began adapting this award-winning open-world experience into five new 15-30 minute learning modules for middle and high school students. While based on the original game, these learning modules contain new content aligned with specific multidisciplinary learning objectives. These include:

- **Self-Reliance:** Focused on English-Language Arts and Social Studies, this module allows students to explore Thoreau’s central themes of self-reliance and his critique of materialism as they take on day one of his life in the woods. Accompanying curriculum includes six modular lessons that explore and engage these themes in active and project-based learning. <https://www.waldengame.com/info-selfreliance>
- **Where I Lived:** Exploring Critical Geography and Social Studies, this module challenges the students to explore the land where Thoreau lived for traces of marginalized peoples who also lived in Walden Woods, including Indigenous people, enslaved and freed Black people, immigrants, and others. Accompanying curriculum includes four modular lessons that challenge students to discover marginalized histories in their own locales through project-based learning. <https://www.waldengame.com/info-where-i-lived>
- **What I Lived For:** Exploring Social-Emotional Learning, this module challenges students to improve the abilities to self-manage and reflect by engaging with the meditative aspects of Thoreau’s experience at the Pond. Accompanying curriculum includes seven modular lessons that connect mindfulness, Transcendentalism, and a relationship to nature through physical and project-based learning. <https://www.waldengame.com/info-what-i-lived-for>
- **Civil Disobedience:** This History and Civics module focuses on Thoreau’s essay of the same name, exploring what it means to engage in civic action that is authentic, responsible, and informed. Accompanying curriculum includes six modular lessons that connect Thoreau’s and his contemporaries’ writings on abolitionism and civil disobedience to the writings of contemporary abolitionist writers and activists. <https://www.waldengame.com/civil-disobedience>

Early evaluation of these game modules points to a model in which 20 out of 22 teachers surveyed who used the new modules and curriculum rated the outcomes in their classrooms as successful or highly successful.

The iLRN workshop includes hands-on activities from several of these modules, as seen in Fig.2, including Where I Lived, What I Lived For, and Civil Disobedience. These will include collaborative analog games that accompany the digital game modules, opportunities for feedback from the participants on their experience with the curriculum, and a discussion of how participants can use similar strategies in their own projects.

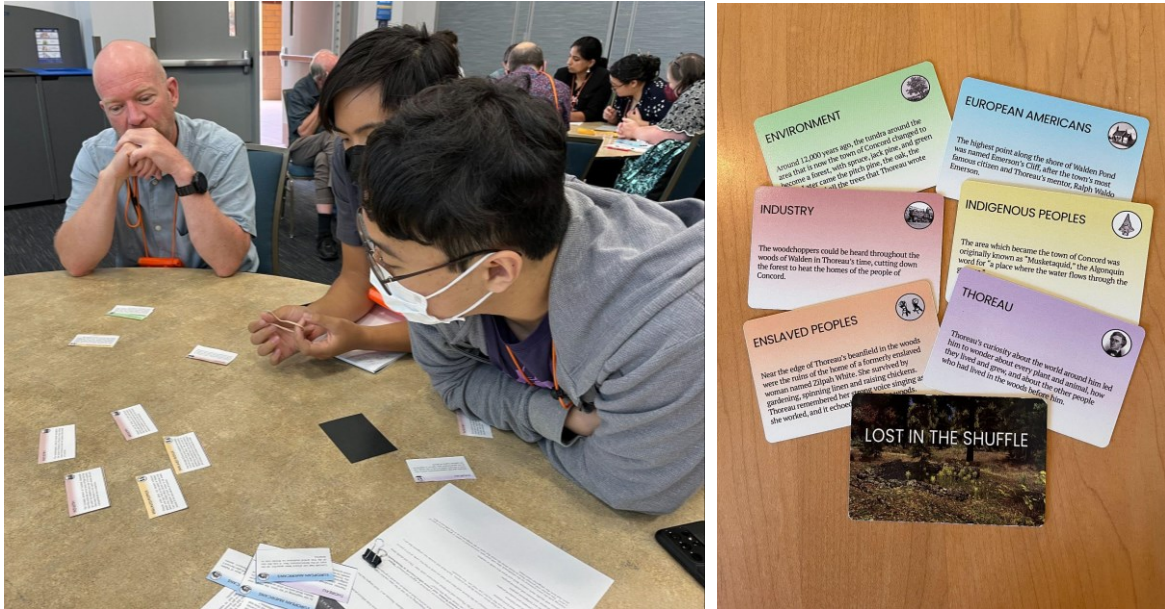


Fig. 2. High school students playing Lost in the Shuffle activity at Games, Learning, and Society (left), and example game cards (right).

References

1. Gee, J.P.: What video games have to teach us about learning and literacy. *Computers in entertainment (CIE)*. 1, 20–20 (2007)
2. Cope, B., Kalantzis, M.: *A pedagogy of multiliteracies: Learning by design*. Springer (2015)