

Curriculum games: An online character-playing project as "ironist curriculum"

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*Authors' note: This paper is a mixture of narrative and theory. The narratives were collected from a project called *Conflux*, in which we aimed to create a new kind of social studies course for high school and college students, through the use of character-play, the web, and a game-like system for making decisions and wielding power. The theory grew out of our reflections on these narratives, as we realized that while our students overwhelmingly indicated that their experiences in the project were engaging and educative, the way that students learn in *Conflux* contrasts sharply with commonly held assumptions about learning goals and curriculum.*

*Mirroring the way that *Conflux* has developed through cycles of theory, practice, and reflection, our paper blends narratives from the development and enactment of the project with explorations of the idea of "ironist curriculum." We use the term "ironist curriculum" to describe an approach to educational goals that embraces the contingent and context-dependent nature of those goals.*

We believe that a narrative format is particularly appropriate to the idea of ironist curriculum because, in contrast to the traditional research paper format, narrative is friendly to surprise, ambiguity, and individual interpretation: things that are eschewed by traditional research methods and traditional curricula (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Jackson, 1995; Sawyer, 2004), but which are at the heart of an ironist approach to curriculum.

The scene: Gary's classroom in a suburban high school. It is 7:40 on a blustery October morning, and the bell hasn't rung yet for first hour. Students began to stagger in twenty minutes ago, some in pairs, many yawning or carrying paper cups from the nearby Starbucks, which does a brisk business just before school. "Need my caffeine fix," explains a boy wearing a football practice jersey.

Barry's not much of a Starbucks guy, but today he walks in with a double latte, looking happy but a bit more worn than usual. "You should have seen me last night. My legs were killing me by halfway through," he says, and you might think, what does he play? Fullback? Wideout? Actually, neither: he plays a conservative southern senator,

a middle-of-the-road western governor and a liberal midwestern mayor in a web-based political simulation game called Conflux. Last night, you learn, was a LiveWired! session, a live-chat talk show hosted by the project directors (including Jeff and Gary – the authors of this paper) and older "mentors," playing Matt Drudge, Tom Brokaw, and Connie Chung. Two of Barry's characters were featured guests. "I couldn't log in as two of my guys at once for the interview," he says. "So I logged in as one guy on my parents' computer upstairs, and as the other in the den downstairs. It was tough, especially when I had to argue with myself." He rolls up his pants leg. "I scraped the crap out of my shin, too. I rammed it into the desk by the stairway when I tried to jump the last few steps to get to the downstairs keyboard." Briefly, you imagine him limping as an old man, thanks to an old internet injury.

Peter walks in. His mayor has been embroiled in controversy, having been accused of embezzlement. (Asked about it, he explained proudly, "I found a bug in the software that allowed me to transfer negative money to my own account.") Financial anarchy ensued, as other characters caught on. On LiveWired!, though, he had been blindsided by Drudge, who presented him with a soon-to-be-published account that he had masterminded the fund-transferring scheme. Now, his character was likely to be subpoenaed, perhaps impeached. At the very least, his power ranking was certain to suffer. "Did you hear that?" Peter asks wryly. "That was the sound of the other shoe dropping."

Barry, 17, and Peter, 16, are enrolled in two of Gary's classes: AP American History and a course simply called "Conflux." In many ways, Conflux is the antithesis of the AP course. There are no exams, no textbook or long research papers. Certain kinds of cheating and deception are not only tolerated but actively encouraged. Most importantly, there is no curriculum in the traditional sense of the term, which means no two cohorts (or students) are likely to wind up with exactly the same experience. Which isn't to say that it's thoughtless, or that activity isn't well considered. Quite the opposite, in fact: we care a great deal about what Barry, Peter, and their classmates learn, and expend enormous energy towards making their learning valuable. We expect them to work hard, communicate clearly, gain knowledge about relevant issues, support their positions with evidence, learn research skills, employ clever strategies, and, in general, think deeply about government and the American political system.

It's just that we don't know exactly what those thoughts will be, or when and how they will come upon them. In fact, we hope they learn something that is very different from what the standards and benchmarks say Barry and Peter should learn. We want them, in short,

to think ironically about what school (and society) says they need to know.

We would not argue that games like Conflux should replace all traditional curricula. Rather, we would like to hold up Conflux as a form of what we have come to call "ironist social studies curriculum." We use the term "irony" (along with the terms "ironic" and "ironist") in the sense of "incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs" (*The American heritage dictionary of the English language*, 2000). While the word "irony" is often associated with humor, we are not implying that social studies curriculum should be treated as a joke. Rather, we use the term to mean a curriculum that embraces surprise and contrast with what is expected.

In schools, however, curriculum is most often oriented toward the expected, in what Pinar terms a "traditionalist" approach. Objectives are taken for granted and therefore seldom questioned. Curricular improvement is a technical matter, much like "adjusting an automobile engine part in order to make it function more effectively" (Pinar, 1978). This approach can also be called an "essentialist" approach (Rorty, 1989), in that truth is understood to be stable, definable, and acceptable on the basis of "common sense." In social studies terms, that often means emphasizing the transmission of a specific cultural canon (e.g., "America stands for liberty").

A somewhat more nuanced approach could be called "metaphysical inquiry": an approach that says, "right now we may not necessarily know what the truth is, but it exists and we can search for it." Applied to curriculum design, this is similar to what Pinar (1978) calls the "conceptual-empiricist" approach, where social science methods are used to determine which models are most effective. In terms of social studies, this approach often involves the process of "searching" for a final definition of public concepts such as justice, liberty, and democratic citizenship; or an ultimately defensible prioritization of competing values. In practice, however, a metaphysical inquiry approach can easily end up being essentialism in disguise: just as a chemistry teacher may know exactly what her students will "discover" from their "experiments," social studies teachers often decide well in advance what kinds of "truth" we are willing to accept as valid.

These approaches have not gone unchallenged. For several decades, critical theorists and other curriculum "reconceptualists" (Pinar, 1978) have advocated an approach that attempts to see through "conventional wisdom" and reveal the power structures and interests which have given rise to currently accepted "truths." The problem with critical theory, some have pointed out, is that it doesn't help teachers figure out what to do, once the prevailing orthodoxies

have been cut down (Hlebowitsh, 1993). Furthermore, rejection of the status quo can itself become an orthodoxy. Most importantly, in our view, critical theory fails to emphasize the fundamental power the act of redescription, of creating new vocabularies, can have in creating a more just distribution of power.

While our concept of ironism shares an antiestablishment disposition with critical theory, the difference is that ironism focuses on the contingency of language and the ways that "truth" can be constructed. That is to say, there is no absolute "truth" outside of our own ways of talking about the world, and the search for "truth" is replaced by the ongoing process of creating better – or more useful – ways of describing the world. We borrow this sense of "irony" from Richard Rorty, who defines an ironist as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance" (Rorty, 1989).

An ironist curriculum, therefore, not only exposes the aims of education as a product of a particular time, place, and set of interests; it also contains the idea that "everything I know and believe is a product of the way I describe the world, and the world can be described differently." An ironist stance not only holds open the possibility of rejecting the status quo, but that of re-creating it, potentially over and over. And that is done through language, by redescribing the world – in other words, by using language in a different way.

It is worth noting that Rorty talks of irony as an exclusively private, or at least personal, matter – and something that should be exercised only after many years of socialization. He writes, "I cannot imagine a culture which socialized its youth in such a way as to make them continually dubious about their own process of socialization. Irony seems inherently a private matter" (Rorty, 1989). Rorty would, in fact, reserve irony for those able to benefit from post-secondary liberal education:

Primary and secondary education will always be a matter of familiarizing the young with what their elders take to be the truth, whether it is true or not. It is not, and never will be, the function of lower-level education to challenge the prevailing consensus about what is true.... But, for quite different reasons, non-vocational higher education is also not a matter of inculcating or educating truth. It is, instead, a matter of inciting doubt and stimulating imagination, thereby challenging the prevailing consensus. (Rorty, 1999)

It is, in essence, an elitist approach to irony. However, in proposing an ironist curriculum, we are arguing that a democratic society cannot afford to have liberal irony reserved for the few. Our argument springs from an ideal of democratic citizenship education based on the notion that, as Noam Chomsky (1997) put it, "a democratic society is one in which the public has the means to participate in some meaningful way in the management of their own affairs and the means of information are open and free." We propose that the fundamental business of a truly democratic society is redescription of our publicly shared beliefs, and more: we believe in the Jeffersonian ideal that holds that the safest repository for such power must be vested in the people, whether or not they make the wisest decisions. What this means, then, is that we must teach our young people to engage in public irony, at least about public matters.

Public irony – that is to say, redescrbing publicly shared values – is a dangerous business. It's one thing to redescrbe oneself – one's own beliefs and desires. Redescrbing others opens the very real possibility that they may not like the redescrption; the act of redescrbing others can be humiliating and cruel. In the real world, of course, this sort of cruelty-through-redescrption happens all the time: those opposed to abortion, for example, portray pro-choice voters as baby killers, while those in favor of abortion rights portray pro-life voters as exploiters of women. In fact, it happens so much that we, as teachers, think special attention should be drawn to the way that it happens. And being good constructivists, we think that students will understand it best if they are able to try it themselves.

Of course, having students practice real cruelty would be, well, cruel. So how can we do it? By creating a place where language has no consequences – or at least no direct ones. That is, by creating the fictional political world of Conflux.

The Conflux project began in 1996 as an independent study activity for some of Gary's advanced high school students. At first it was a fairly simple character-playing game: Each student took on the role of a real-life mayor, governor and senator in a series of online conferences, though to make debate more interesting, decisions were made through a dynamic voting system that included an element of chance.

Over the following years, as the project expanded to include more students and other high schools, it evolved into something very different from what Gary had anticipated. Changes were made in response to student activity, and as time went on the game evolved from a simple simulation into something more darkly nuanced and anarchistic. First, journalists were added. Then lobbyists arrived,

wielding significant power to make or break campaigns. Constituents were created – dull-witted and knee-jerk at times, quick to take offense and often deeply (and justifiably) cynical about office holders. Polling services popped up, which not only reported public opinion, but also shaped it. Media blitzes were planned to try to increase campaign contributions, which were in turn needed for politicians to stage coups within their own caucuses.

What Gary had started as a lesson about the levels of government became a political system with a life of its own – and not all the politics was within the context of the online environment. Real-life friendships were formed – and destroyed. Fistfights broke out in the cafeteria over "character assassination." There were plenty of teachable moments, but the lessons learned became harder and harder to summarize.

And then, of course, there were the inevitable bouts of revolution.

In 1999, Gary wrote the following:

That afternoon, Allen was—as usual—sitting in my classroom with a group of students who had stayed after school “plotting” Conflux strategy. By 4:00 I had become so engrossed in constructing the message I had forgotten they were there. With words failing me, I swore loud enough to prick Allen’s ears.

“Someone hack into the server again?” he asked. The previous semester, in the interest of convincing the players in the Conference of Virtual Senators to address the issue of technological ethics, I had faked an attack on one of the Conflux machines. The political cant that replaced the entry screen to the discussion forum had caused more of a stir around campus than I had expected, and even though none of the students had been involved in the game at the time, the “hackers” had become part of game lore.

I tried to explain to them that I was having a hard time articulating what, exactly, the game was all about.

“I’ll be honest with you,” I said. “It’s hard even defining what, exactly, you all are learning when you play.”

“What are we supposed to be learning?” someone else asked, in a voice that clearly expected a direct response.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. This produced an extended silence, which I suppose is to be expected when your teacher confesses he has no idea what he’s been teaching.

“I mean, I know what I tell the school you’re supposed to be learning.” This was another odd admission, one that served to pique their interest.

I should say that around this time, my dissertation chair suggested it might be interesting to ask students to reflect on what they had learned, in the context of the standardized benchmarks published by the state each year. I admit I was less than enthused by the idea at first because I thought this might somehow pollute my research data, but at this moment the proverbial devil appeared on my shoulder. I showed them the post-hoc curriculum guide I had written only a month earlier, two years after the course pilot began. It included references to the Michigan Curriculum Framework for Social Studies benchmarks. Over two dozen of them were cited, including:

- Generate possible alternative resolutions to public issues and evaluate them using criteria that have been identified.
- Engage each other in elaborated conversations that deeply examine public policy issues and help make reasoned and informed decisions.
- Explain why people may agree on democratic values in the abstract but disagree when they are applied to specific situations.

The problem, I told them, wasn’t deciding on which benchmarks to address. The problem was deciding what the benchmarks meant.

Allen didn’t see what the fuss was about. He scanned the list from top to bottom.

“Well, we do most of that,” he said. “It would be hard not to do most of that if you talk about stuff in a class. What’s the big deal?”

I reminded him of his recent post in which he, as then-Governor George Bush, called for a revolution against the "Conflux system":

TOPIC:	No Legislation without Representation (1 of 1)
CONF:	Conference of Virtual Governors, Second Resolution Round
FROM:	George Bush
DATE:	Monday, May 10, 1999 11:26 AM

Many of you have many questions as well as reservations about my revolution. I will try my best to answer all of you questions in this post.

Why Revolution? The answer is simple. To ask us to pass legislation without representation is simply impossible. We have no say in the matter; we can't even amend the resolutions. No matter what options, no matter how horrible we are expected to vote on them even if they will have dire consequences? This idea is preposterous and I refuse to support it. We need some say in the options so we can lead to effective resolutions. The only way to get this power is through revolution.

The idea of revolution may seem rather radical but in this case it is appropriate. We have no control and revolution is the only means we have to obtain control. Once we have control we can propose effective solutions to the agendas. Look at the power you have now. You are mere pawn in the director's game. We should not be the pawn but rather the kings, each and every one of us. We should be calling the shots....

A debate ensued, with arguments and counter-arguments, like this one from the character of Mike Johanns:

TOPIC: Revolutionaries Unite? (2 of 3)
 CONF: Conference of Virtual Governors: Second Resolution Round
 FROM: Mike Johanns
 DATE: Monday, May 17, 1999 01:33 PM

Fellow Governors,

This move for a revolution is ridiculous, and makes a mockery of our current government institution. While Gov. Bush, who recently committed political suicide in his bid for a Presidential nomination, brings up a good point, pointing out the lack of strong resolutions, he misses the point completely, and ultimately becomes that which he is revolting against. Gov. Bush complains that the current options are not effective enough, and has argued that we as governors should work together for better resolutions. He has amerced himself in a fight for unification among the politicians, yet he has developed a series of options by himself, and has been pushing for their support among other governors. If I or other governors dislike Bush's options, should we then take a page from his ridiculous posts and revolt against him?

I guess in Gov. Bush's ideal world, we would revolt against everything we disagreed with, resulting in nothing being passed and no ideas being formulated. Gov. Bush is way off the mark with his recent posts. If he truly wanted to make changes he would contact the Conflux director and attempt to work out a make-shift

committee to decide the options, but no, he chooses to overtake all the workable options within the game and present us with this sudo-revolution. God help us all if any of you support this lunatic, and have pity for his constituents, who are most likely wondering what the hell their representative is doing.

True, Thomas Jefferson stated that a little revolution was good for the country, but this was only due to oppressive gov'ts, not a difference of opinions. This entire revolution is an ego trip for Bush, and I guess he has succeeded in making us respond to his assinine statements rather than deliberating over the real issue, the passage of proper abortion rights laws.

Sincerely,

Mike Johanns, (R-Nebraska)

... I saw this exchange as a clear instantiation of that third benchmark. "Now," I said, "did you guys agree on democratic principles?"

"I guess so," he answered, clearly not understanding why this was such a big deal.

Ted, who played Mike Johanns, snickered. "Oh, yeah, Allen, that's why you tried to stage a revolution, right? Because you all agreed in principle about the way government should run?" This was an ongoing argument, one that had cropped up repeatedly during this round outside the game.

"No, you guys are a bunch of pansy-ass sheep, that's all. You were going to go along with the mentors' little resolutions, even if they didn't do anything."

"What do you mean, we're sheep?" asked Paul. "I got kicked out of office, remember?"

"I think that proves my point."

"Commie," Ted called Allen.

"Baa," answered Allen, good-naturedly.

The next morning, in keeping with recently established tradition, the screen savers on over fifty computers throughout the high school read either, "Johanns Bleats: 'Just Following Orders,'" or "Bush Thinks He's Thomas Fucking Paine." The ones in my room

read, dryly: “Don’t be brainwashed by Weisserman’s propaganda. The Government is good. Revolution is bad. Work hard. All is well.” I found it interesting that my inaction could be construed as propaganda. I found it more interesting that all three screen-saver messages that day had been authored by Deena, who was neither present during the debate nor, technically, still involved in the game. Meanwhile, Paul, who played the recently deposed John Rockefeller, Jr., updated the underground web site I wasn’t supposed to know about to include a picture of Allen’s character with his head in a French Revolution-era guillotine. And I received my daily dose of dirty looks from the staff responsible for the media center and CAD-CAM lab computers, who couldn’t figure out how the kids kept bypassing their security measures, nor why they’d want to insert cryptic political commentary for everyone to read.

As it turned out, this was far from the last time a revolution was attempted in a Conflux session, and asking students to compare their learning to the state civics standards became a regular practice, even after Jeff began bringing in college students as part of an on-line course. Later groups of Conflux players, when asked these questions, responded with equal skepticism about "what they were expected to learn." For example, Colin, who played Conflux in 2002, had this to say about the state civics standards:

You can sort of see that these Core Democratic Values, which are presented as absolute, unwavering ... I think that when you see them ... through knowledge of Conflux, that they're not as absolute as the [writers of the state standards] think they are.

After a semester of treating all issues as political, Colin needed no prodding to see the state standards themselves as products of a political process:

I would argue that these ideals are invoked, perhaps because of genuine belief, but more often out of a need to appeal to voters who like to hear them as buzzwords, quite frankly.

The state standards, held up as the goal toward which all schooling should strive, never felt more murky and unhelpful. Or rather: the students are almost always absolutely certain they have met most of the standards (and could articulate when, and how). But they are no longer able to accept the standards at face value.

This fits well with our conception of ironic curriculum, in the sense that students are coming to conclusions that are often incongruous with accepted truths about democracy, and about their

own education. We can't say that every student who participates in Conflux develops an ironic appreciation for the educational system, but many seem to. In creating a safe place in which students can freely experiment with political language, we have also created a safe place for students to challenge the vocabulary of civics education.

We could end the story here, and come to a tidy conclusion. But there is a dilemma, hinted at in the end of Gary's excerpt above, where a student warns others of his "propaganda." For Gary, the disturbing thing wasn't that he couldn't say exactly what the students were learning. He anticipated that much. What was, and is, disturbing is almost the opposite: despite the ownership that the students clearly felt over their characters, despite the remarkable engagement that the students showed with the project, both online and off-line, it was possible that the students were being led inexorably toward certain ideas. Perhaps the outcome was not open-ended after all.

Years later, at an Ann Arbor sidewalk cafe on a warm June day in 2003, Jeff talked to one of Gary's former high school students – Kelly, now a college student – who had played in one of the first sessions of Conflux.

Some people thought we were being brainwashed, really they did. They thought they were being tricked into thinking something about politics and they didn't know why or how but they were pretty sure they hadn't believed it starting out...by that I mean they thought things were being set up so it'd happen a certain way, that things were being instigated, and that really weirded them out. It's not that they were being given ideas any more or less than in any class but for the first time there was this idea that, well people wanted to know about the system that was promoting these ideas and the reasons why. They started wondering what was rigged and what wasn't and this happened progressively more as the game went on.

As Jeff and Kelly talked, two classmates, Ellen and Nina, happened to walk by, both of them former Conflux players. Although it had been years since they had played Conflux, they talked about the events in the kind of detail usually reserved for important personal memories. Jeff asked them about being "brainwashed."

Nina: Of course, that's not even a question. I knew from the beginning. It was a political simulation, and what part of politics isn't manipulation? And that's Weisserman's character.

Ellen: I think I was willing to be brainwashed. My parents expected me to get As and go to college and stuff, but no one ever challenged me to think. And I was happy to have someone expect more of me. And if that meant going with what Gary thought, that was ok. And I was so taken with the chance to have something important to say and being taken seriously.

Is it brainwashing if the ones doing the brainwashing aren't aware of what they're doing? Is the nature of character-playing games like Conflux such that they mostly tease out the unconscious assumptions of their designers? And does it really matter? At its worst, Conflux would be a different kind of subversive teaching; at its best, the sort of discussion that goes on in the game and behind the scenes is a desired kind of ironic dialogue. But where education is concerned, especially in the social studies, it's one thing to be happy with an outcome, another thing entirely to be satisfied with a process.

We said in the opening of this paper that no two students are likely to wind up with exactly the same experience, and that we don't know exactly what they will learn. Now that you are at the end of this paper, you probably don't really believe that, and as we write this, we are forced to the conclusion that we don't completely believe it either. It's true that we never know exactly what topics will be chosen, who will be the leaders and deal-makers, and precisely when and how scandals will erupt. But today, after 17 different sessions of Conflux, it would be hard to say that we are surprised by what happens each time, and we even go so far as to purposely provoke "surprises" like the revolt described above. For us, if not for the students, Conflux has lost its irony, at least in the sense of something that contrasts with the expected. And perhaps that was inevitable. In the end, as much as we would like to think otherwise, Conflux may have taken on another aspect of irony. In Webster's Seventh New College Dictionary (1969), the first definition of "irony" is as follows:

1: a pretense of ignorance and of willingness to learn from another assumed in order to make the other's false conceptions conspicuous by adroit questioning -- called also Socratic irony.

All this (we write with a sigh), and we may have simply ended up with a fancy version of the Socratic method. Which might, of course, be the most ironic outcome of all.

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